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REACH FOR TOMORROW
The story of a beautiful, disillusioned nurse who found excitement, challenge—and love, aboard an ocean-going freighter.
Georgia Craig

Claire Frazier knew that Richard was unhappy with the long pull that faced him before he could be the financially successful doctor he wanted to be. It made no difference to Claire; she loved Rick and she loved being a nurse, and work was the one thing she wasn't afraid of. In fact, she looked forward to working along with her fiance until the day they both could have all the things Rick wanted them to have.

Claire considered herself lucky—far more so than poor-little-rich-girl Elaine Crossett, who had tried to do away with herself out of sheer boredom with her idle-rich, useless life.

Elaine was Rick's patient, and Claire expected him to treat her with kindness and tenderness. She never thought twice about the time he was spending with her—until she picked up the morning newspaper and read of the elopement of Elaine Crossett and Dr. Richard Massey.

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Chapter One

Claire Frazier came briskly down the corridor of the Women's Wing of Chatworth Memorial Hospital. It was fifteen minutes before she went on duty, but she always came down the corridor fifteen minutes ahead of time. Her light gray eyes were alight as she moved with the swift, effortless grace of a trained nurse. Her crisp uniform was immaculate. Her brown-gold hair, crowned with its cherished small RN cap, was held high. In short, she made a very pretty picture as she walked the long corridor.

Her pace slowed ever so slightly as a tall young man in hospital whites came toward her, and the light in her gray eyes warmed.

"Good morning, Doctor." She spoke demurely, her tone soft, but the light in her eyes laughing at the phrase as she looked up at him.

"Good morning, Nurse," said Dr. Massey, his tone matching hers, routine, ordinary, matter of fact. But under his breath as they stood there he said, his voice husky, "Hello, my beautiful beloved."

For a breathless moment they stood smiling at each other.

"How was Emergency last night?" she asked after a shaken moment while his eyes drank her in.

"Routine," he answered, and again spoke in a voice that could reach her ears alone, "If you could possibly know how much I want to take you in my arms and kiss you!"

Color flushed Claire's pretty face, and her eyes met his.

"I want that, too, darling." Her whisper was a thread of

sound scarcely strong enough to support its yearning tenderness.

"Do you?"

"You know I do!"

He drew a deep, hard breath.

"It's about all that keeps me going," he told her huskily. "Two more months and then—"

"Oh, yes, darling—and then!"

They were so absorbed in each other that they were not aware of the scrubbed, crew-cut young man in hospital whites, the inevitable small black bag in his hand, who came briskly toward them and slowed as he passed, his eyes straight ahead.

"Break it up, kids," he muttered without looking at them. "The Big Chief is on the prowl. Morning rounds in ten minutes."

"Thanks, Bob," said Dr. Massey without looking at the young interne. And then as a group of nurses, headed by the stout, impressive figure of the Chief of Staff, appeared at the end of the corridor, Dr. Massey said softly, "See you around, honey."

"Yes, Doctor," said Claire demurely, her eyes twinkling as he nodded and moved away and she went on down the corridor to her patient.

She couldn't remember when she had first known that she was in love with Richard Massey. He had been a junior interne, she a third-year student nurse when suddenly they had seemed to look at each other and know that they were meant for each other. And now she was an RN and he was completing a special year in surgery; in two months when he had finished that training, they were going to be married and set up shop together back in her home town! It was a prospect so dazzling that she entered room 1003-B with her eyes shining and her pretty face flushed.

The night-duty nurse looked up as she came in and grinned.

"You have the look of a gal who's just seen and spoken to her best beloved," she teased.

"Does it show as plainly as that?" Claire laughed and turned to the patient. "Good morning, Miss Dawson. How do you feel this morning?"

"Oh, I'll probably live—darn it!" said the stout, elderly woman who was propped in bed, her broken leg still in traction, her thinning white hair neatly brushed above a freshly scrubbed face.

Mrs. Stokes, the night-duty nurse, was just putting away the morning bath things, and she clucked disapprovingly.

"Now is that any way to talk?" she scolded lightly, "after all Chatworth Memorial has done for you?"

"I suppose not," admitted Amanda Dawson reluctantly, though her blue eyes were twinkled. "It's just that lying here looking at that ridiculous leg standing straight up in the air makes me feel like a fool!"

"Well, it's mending beautifully and you'll soon be going home, so try not to worry about it," Mrs. Stokes soothed her and smiled at Claire. "She's all yours, Claire, until four P.M."

"I do love the way you nurses parcel me out among you, as though I were a cold Sunday night supper!" Amanda complained.

"We don't mean it to sound that way and you know it," Claire said gently as Mrs. Stokes grimaced and left the room. "We all love you and look forward to taking care of you—"

Amanda studied her sharply.

"Which is a bare-faced lie and you know it," she cut in grimly. "I'm a mean, cantankerous old woman with a tongue made of sandpaper, and only the fact that you've just seen your boy friend makes you so gentle with me. Love—it's wonderful!"

"It really is, isn't it?" Claire marveled softly.

Amanda made a rude noise and then grinned.

"Why ask me? How'd a grouchy old maid like me know anything about it?" she mocked. "But I'll say one thing for you; I can always tell when you've seen him. You look as if you were floating around on rose-colored clouds. I suppose you had a date with him last night?"

"He was on duty in Emergency," Claire answered, and stood up as the door opened and the little procession she had seen outside swept into the room.

The Chief of Staff, with a resident on either side of him, the head nurse, attended by two of her senior student nurses, all glanced about the small, neat room with sharp eyes for any hint of untidiness.

The Chief growled a greeting to Claire, managed a faint smile at Amanda, studied the chart, nodded, turned and strode out with his devoted court following at a respectful distance.

Amanda stared at the door closing behind the senior student nurses, and her eyebrows went up a little.

"Quite the grand manner he has, hasn't he?" she derided the Chief. "Do you think he really knows whether I'm going to live or die—or that he would be even mildly interested one way or the other?"

"Oh, now, you mustn't say that!" Claire was appalled that anyone should dare speak disrespectfully of the Chief, who was a figure of somewhat fearsome awe to the staff. "Of course he would! He took your chart in at a glance, approved of what was being done for you, and went on to finish his rounds. After all, you *are* convalescent, and he has an awful lot on his mind."

"Sure, sure, sure," Amanda agreed. "But let me give you a word of advice for that handsome brute of yours that you're going to marry. You are, aren't you?"

Claire laughed richly.

"If you mean Dr. Massey, I surely am!" she boasted happily.

"Then for heaven's sake, try to persuade him to treat a patient like a human being, not just a case record," snapped Amanda crossly. "Even if we are strung up like a side of beef in a smoke-house, we do have feelings and fears and hopes and aspirations. And a doctor with a good bed-side manner nowadays is hard to find and much to be cherished. Don't forget that, my girl."

"I won't, Miss Dawson, and neither will Rick," Claire

assured her earnestly. "Rick's a wonderful person. He'll never forget the human being in a patient. He just couldn't. He's not that kind of doctor."

Amanda's eyes twinkled but her smile was warm.

"Kind of like the lad, don't you?" she teased.

Claire laughed, "That's scarcely a secret! Everybody in the hospital knows it, I imagine."

"And he'd be a fool if he didn't feel the same way about you, my girl."

Claire said softly, "He's far from being a fool, Miss Dawson."

The door opened to admit a pretty candy-striper in her neat red and white pinafore, a basket of mail on her arm.

"I brought the patient's mail, Miss Frazier," she announced, and handed Claire a thick sheaf of mail, smiled shyly at Amanda and went out.

Amanda eyed the mail without enthusiasm.

"Next to the Christmas card racket is the 'get well' card foolishness," she said curtly. "I'll take a wager that ninety percent of that bundle of mail is made up of 'get well' cards and all of them from people who don't give a darn whether I do or not!"

"Oh, now, some of the cards are very pretty," Claire protested lightly.

"Where's the morning paper? You going to read it to me this morning?" she demanded.

"Especially the stock-market reports," Claire told her demurely.

"Unless there's a nice juicy scandal," Amanda told her.

Claire laughed and unfolded the morning paper and a moment later asked curiously, "Would you know a Mrs. Elaine Crossett?"

"Not personally, thank heaven. She's a well-known divorcee who makes a business of getting married and then divorced, always with a sizable bundle of alimony. No doubt the current husband is delighted to pay her handsomely to be rid of her. Whom has she married this time?"

Claire's eyes ran over the printed lines, and she answered

quietly, "Nobody at the moment. She's here in the hospital. An overdose of sleeping-pills, taken accidentally, it is assumed."

Amanda's eyes widened.

"It must have been an accident," she said grimly. "That one is much too fond of her gay life to want to end it—"

"She's very beautiful," said Claire, studying the photograph, a carefully posed studio portrait of a fragile-looking blonde, bare shoulders above a froth of misty gown, jewels at the throat and in the ears.

"Sure she's beautiful. It's her chief stock in trade," said Amanda brusquely. "Takes after her mother's side of the family. Pity she couldn't have taken after her father's side. He was quite a man."

Claire was still studying the photograph.

"Rick was on Emergency last night, so she must have been his patient," she mused thoughtfully.

"Well, don't let that bother you!" scoffed Amanda. "A stomach pump is scarcely a romantic article, and that's the way they have to get a patient over the sleeping-pill business. Let's see about the stock reports."

Claire turned the newspaper's pages and settled down to reading aloud while Amanda listened, shrewd-eyed and absorbed, occasionally making notes.

Chapter Two

At four o'clock, going off duty, Claire was halfway down the corridor when a door opened and Maude Welch, a fellow nurse, emerged into the corridor, looking harried and anxious.

"Oh, Claire, be a pal and stay with my patient while I go roust Dr. Massey out," she pleaded. "She's determined

to go home, and he hasn't dismissed her and says she must stay at least two or three more days. She won't listen to me and demands to see him."

"I don't blame her," Claire said softly. "He's very nice to see."

"Oh, sure, you'd think so," Maude scoffed. "But stay with her and keep her in bed, even if you have to slug her, until I can get him."

"Sure," Claire agreed, and opened the door of the hospital's best suite as Maude scurried down the corridor.

The patient lay against her pillow, soft golden hair spread out about her pale face, her eyes darkly blue, her thin-lipped mouth sullen.

"Well, who are you?" she demanded sharply. "Whoever you are, get me my clothes, unless you want me to walk out of here in this monstrosity of a garment."

"I'm Nurse Frazier, Mrs. Crossett," said Claire quietly. "Nurse Welch has gone for Dr. Massey. He'll be here very soon."

"Oh, so you know who I am?" Obviously Elaine wasn't surprised that this should be so.

"I recognized you from your picture in the paper this morning," Claire answered pleasantly, adjusting the covers that Elaine had disturbed.

There was a shocked murmur from Elaine, and her dark blue eyes widened.

"My picture was in the paper this morning?" she repeated, and added with a faint touch of anxiety, "Oh, of course, on the social page—"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Crossett. It was on the front page," Claire told her.

The alarm deepened in Elaine's lovely eyes.

"The front page? But why should it have been?" she stammered.

"Oh, it's routine that when a patient is brought in for emergency treatment a report goes to the police, and the newspapers get it," Claire told her. "And of course you are

prominent, and naturally the newspapers would make a front page story of your accident."

Elaine studied her sullenly.

"What makes you think it was an accident?" she demanded.

"Well, I can't believe a woman as young and beautiful and wealthy as you would want to destroy your life, with everything you have to live for," Claire answered quite honestly.

For a moment Elaine stared at her as though dumbfounded.

"I don't suppose it could ever occur to you that one could become so bored—" she began, and broke off and suddenly laughed, an ugly, mirthless laugh that was the epitome of bitterness. "Everything I have to live for! If you only knew what a laugh that is!"

A moment later Dr. Massey came in swiftly and Elaine stared at him, wide-eyed, as he stood beside the bed, his fingers on her pulse, his smile warm and friendly.

"Now what's all this nonsense about your wanting to go home, Mrs. Crossett? Don't you like our hospital?" There was gentle raillery in his voice as he took the chart that Maude extended, while Claire lingered near the door, filling her eyes with the sight of him.

"Who are you?" demanded Elaine, studying him intently.

"I'm your doctor," Dr. Massey explained, and his friendly smile was a white flash in his darkly handsome face. "I like to take at least part of the credit for saving your life last night. And now you want to rush off and leave us. Is that gratitude?"

"I didn't ask you to save my life," Elaine reminded him sullenly, her eyes still devouring him. "But thanks, anyway."

"Just part of the job, the service the hospital is happy to render," Dr. Massey assured her, and there was a faintly mocking note in his voice to match the twinkle in his brown eyes. "You don't really want to go home, do you?"

Elaine's eyes were intent, and suddenly she smiled and

settled herself a little more comfortably against her pillows.

"Certainly not. Whoever said I did?" she answered firmly. "I may be here for weeks and weeks—who knows? I like it here."

"That's good," Dr. Massey laughed. "But I'm afraid we can't allow you to stay here that long. A week should see you back on your feet and ready to leave us."

Elaine studied him, and suddenly she smiled happily.

"Then I'll buy the hospital and make it my permanent home and you shall be my permanent doctor," she assured him.

"You're not looking forward to requiring a permanent doctor, I hope, and settling down to semi-invalidism?" Dr. Massey asked solemnly.

"The thought has a certain appeal," Elaine assured him.

"Well, we'll talk about that later," Dr. Massey told her as he turned toward the door. "I'll look in on you in the morning."

"You do that, Doctor," purred Elaine. "I shall look forward to it."

Demurely Claire held the door open for him, followed him out into the corridor and closed the door gently behind them.

"That's a dangerous woman, Rick, my lad," she said quietly.

Dr. Massey's hand reached for hers and folded it tightly in his own, and his eyes took her in with a look so caressing that she had the heady feeling that he was kissing her.

"What woman? I know only one woman in the world, Treasure, and that's you!" His voice was low and husky and brought the color in a warm tide to her face.

"That's the way I want it to be, Rick, always!" Her own voice was pitched low, threaded with ardor, and her fingers curled even more tightly about his.

"It will be, dearest—I promise," he told her tenderly.

For a moment they were content just to stand there, their hands clenched tightly together, so that she could feel the warmth and tenderness curling about her quivering heart.

"I want to kiss you." His voice was a thread of sound. "I want so terribly to kiss you."

She leaned toward him and then glanced guiltily about the corridor where nurses were going busily to and fro getting their patients ready for supper, nurses were going off duty, other nurses were going on duty, and the busy, brisk, somewhat self-conscious young internes carried their small black bags, and here and there a candy-striper was very busy and self-important.

Claire smiled up at him and drew a long deep breath.

"Well, I'm afraid we'd fracture some of the hospital's most stringent rules and regulations, Doctor," she murmured softly for his ears alone. "But if you're off duty—"

"I'm not, hang it. Not until midnight. But if you are, maybe we could have coffee?" he suggested hopefully.

"That would be lovely." She smiled up at him.

A little later, at a corner table in the coffee shop, he glanced about him distastefully at the groups of hospital personnel, the sprinkling of anxious relatives awaiting word about patients whom they had come to see, and suddenly he scowled.

"I have seldom," he told her grimly, "known two people in love who had so much trouble finding a moment of privacy."

She slid her hand to him beneath the edge of the table, and her eyes were warm and sweet as she whispered, "Two more months, darling, and then—"

He nodded above his cooling coffee, and beneath the edge of the table his hand caressed hers, lingering over the ring finger, his thumb brushing it.

"And I haven't even given you a ring." He seemed to feel a real shame at that.

"Well, of course not." Claire laughed softly. "Don't you remember? You wanted to and I dared you to spend the money! We're going to need every cent we can rake and scrape together, darling, for the equipment we'll need. Since you don't want to be assigned to a town where all the

equipment and a house and office and such will be furnished—"

"If we're going to set up shop on our own, darling, let's see to it that we are on our own!" he cut in swiftly, and she knew how much this meant to him. "If there's one thing a young doctor setting up practice on his own needs, it's *freedom,* not to be beholden to some town board to do as he's told."

Claire, eager to rouse him from his bitter mood, managed a small smile, a teasing light in her eyes.

"Is that really the most important thing a young doctor needs?"

Momentarily puzzled, Dr. Massey scowled at her.

"Can you think of anything he needs more?" he demanded.

"Well, I've heard that a good office nurse is important, too," she mocked lightly.

Beneath the edge of the table his hand closed so tightly on hers that she barely managed not to wince with the pain; yet not for anything in the world would she have had that pain lessened by the loosening of that grip.

"It's going to be a long, hard pull, honey," he told her huskily.

"You aren't by any chance trying to jilt me, are you?"

"What a stupid thing to say!" There was an edge of anger in his voice as though he considered the question an insult.

"Then stop trying to scare me off," she answered briskly. "As if I didn't know how long it takes to get a practice established, or how little money a general practitioner in a small town can hope for. Don't you suppose I *know?* Have you forgotten my father and mother started out just the way you and I are going to start?"

He was silent for a moment, and once again his hand held hers in that achingly close grip.

"Funny," he said very softly, "how a girl can make a man feel like the most humble creature that ever cluttered

the face of the earth—and in the same breath make him feel like a king! Thanks, Precious."

Radiant, bright-eyed, a lovely smile touching her soft mouth, Claire murmured, "You're welcome, darling."

A week later, the local newspapers gave front page space to the elopement of Elaine Crossett, prominent young socialite, with Dr. Richard Massey, credited with having saved her life from a recent overdose of barbiturates.

Chapter Three

Claire, huddled in her nurse's cape, ran from the nurse's dormitory in the bitter cold of that winter morning into the main building of the big hospital. As she crossed the big lobby, there was a small group of nurses with their heads bent above the morning newspaper, but she only smiled at them and tossed a gay greeting as she hurried into the elevator.

"Cold outside." She laughed at Pete, the elderly operator who always had a cheerful greeting for her but who, this morning, merely nodded as he sent the elevator aloft to the Women's Wing.

She glanced along the corridor as she left the elevator and her heart sank a little. There was no sign of Rick, and she went on to her patient.

Amanda looked at her keenly as she and the night-duty nurse conferred for a moment over the chart, and then the night-duty nurse, with only a brusque word, hurried out of the room closing the door behind her.

Claire said gaily, "You're looking fine this morning, Miss Dawson. You must have had a comfortable night, and I'm so glad."

"You look pretty fresh and beamish yourself, my girl,"

said Amanda grumpily, and eyed her curiously. "I take it you haven't seen the morning paper?"

"I'm afraid not," Claire said. "I overslept—"

Amanda took up the paper, held it for a moment and then said reluctantly, "I wish there was an easier way for you to learn this, Claire. But I suppose there isn't. Here."

Puzzled, Claire took the paper folded to show a story on the front page and read it, the color seeping from her face, her eyes going wide as her heart died agonizingly within her.

Amanda watched her, pity and anger striving for ascendancy in her eyes as she saw Claire sway a little and then slide into a chair and raise her face to meet Amanda's face.

"Oh, but—why—this can't be true. There's some sort of hideous mistake—" she whispered piteously.

"I'm afraid not, Claire."

Claire's shaking hands crumpled the newspaper, and she caught her lip between her teeth and bit down until a tiny drop of blood showed there.

"Oh—but Rick—he couldn't—" she stammered faintly, even while she was thrusting back the ugly conviction that he could, that he had. Elaine, with her fragile blonde beauty, most of all, Elaine with her great wealth—and Rick had so hated being poor—

For a little while she sat in silence, fighting the deadly wave of nausea that threatened her, fighting off the threat of fainting because nurses were trained to cope with emergencies, even such emergencies as this! Only there couldn't be another like this! When everything a girl has dreamed of died a lingering death in her heart, when the man on whom she had centered all her hopes and dreams, the man to whom she had given all her heart, threw the gift back in her face and went off with some other woman.

Amanda waited, sick with pity for the girl. And at last Claire drew a deep, hard breath and squared her shoulders.

"That's the girl," said Amanda hearteningly. "It hurts, I know. It happened to me. Not quite so brutally, but just as devastatingly. So you have to make up your mind that you

were in love with the man you thought he was, not the man he turned out to be."

"I don't know how to do that—" It was a small frantic wail.

"It takes time," Amanda told her heavily, "a lot of time. And every step of the way hurts."

Claire sat very still, and Amanda studied her.

"You didn't have any warning that it was going to happen?"

Claire made a little restrained gesture of dismissal.

"But how could I? She wasn't my patient—I only saw her once—"

"He didn't say anything?"

Claire shook her head. She felt as though she were smothering in a thick, foul darkness that she could not escape. Amanda went on watching her, and her eyes showed her sympathy with Claire's pain and bewilderment.

And then Amanda swore: a loud, round oath.

"Oh, but you mustn't say that," Claire replied miserably. "I—well, he isn't altogether to blame. He so hated being poor; and she is very rich and very beautiful—"

"And if you want to wait around for him," Amanda said brutally, "he'll probably come sneaking back to you with his tail between his legs as soon as she gets tired of him, and you can have him back if you want him."

Claire shrank from the brutality of the words and put her hands over her face.

"Elaine never stays married to a man more than six months," Amanda went on, trying to cauterize the bitter wound dealt to Claire. "If he's smart—and it looks as though he has an eye to the main chance for himself—he'll insist she make a substantial settlement on him before he agrees to a divorce—"

"Oh, don't!" Claire could not endure the ugliness of the picture.

"You may as well face it, my dear, because that's what will happen." Amanda pursued her relentlessly. "So if you

have the patience—and the lack of pride—to wait for him and take him back—"

"I don't! At least—I don't think I do—"

"Good girl!" said Amanda approvingly. "Then what are you going to do?"

Claire looked at her with wide, dazed eyes.

"Do?" she repeated helplessly.

"Of course you have the entire sympathy of everybody in the hospital—"

"I don't want to be pitied!"

"Of course you don't," Amanda answered. "But you will be. Everybody will hate him and feel sorry for you, so the thing for you to do is go away from the hospital—"

Claire stared at her, and Amanda nodded.

"It takes time to heal a wound like this," she went on quietly. "It helps if there is a change of scene. New people, new places—away from people who know about what's happened. Do you have any ideas in mind?"

"I'm too stunned even to think—"

Amanda nodded. "Of course you are. But I have something in mind that might interest you. Ever thought of taking a cruise around the world?"

Claire managed a threadbare, completely unconvincing laugh.

"On what?" she asked wryly.

"On a freighter," answered Amanda briskly. "They carry cargo, but also a small passenger list."

"Sounds delightful." Claire's training was giving her some small measure of control, though the bitter ache in her heart would not be eased. "But I'm a nurse, remember? Not a millionaire."

Amanda's mouth twisted with a sly grin, though above it her eyes were anxious and troubled.

"Well, contrary to what people like to believe about me, neither am I," she said quietly. "However, I can manage the cruise for you, and it would give me a vast deal of pleasure after your kindness to me—"

"Thanks, but I couldn't possibly accept—"

"Will you be quiet and listen to me?" Amanda snapped. "I've planned a cruise like this for a long time. I made reservations, paid for transportation and have been waiting for a notice that a ship had been found with a single vacancy. That notification came yesterday—with me piled up like this—and by the time this wretched leg is well, I'll have passed my sixty-fifth birthday and no longer be eligible. The freighter cruises are open only to people between twelve and sixty-five: and only twelve passengers are carried, because if they take more, they have to carry an RN also. Since I can't use this reservation, and since it's already been paid for, I can't see any reason why you shouldn't go in my place, do you?"

Claire put her shaking hands to her face and sat still for a long moment while Amanda went on telling her about the cruise. At last Amanda broke off to ask, "Didn't you tell me your mother and father were living in Hawaii?"

"Why, yes. Imagine you remembering that—"

"You'd be surprised what a memory I've got, my girl, as some of my competitors on the local stock market will agree," said Amanda dryly. "You can leave the ship anywhere you like. Why not in Honolulu for a visit to your parents? That ought to take your mind off this—this unmentionable doctor—"

Claire was staring at her wide-eyed.

"Well?" Amanda's voice cut into Claire's thoughts. "Wouldn't you like to see them again? You told me you hadn't seen them in four years, not since they went out there. And I'm told it's beautiful country."

"I don't know what to say—" Claire stammered, and some of the anguish in her heart faded slightly at the thought of seeing her mother and father again.

"Well, say yes, for goodness sake, so I can call my travel agent and arrange for you to take my place. Then you'll have a lot of packing to do; a physical examination, because the ship's owners want to be sure nobody goes aboard in anything but perfect health. The hospital can take care of that—"

Claire listened in a daze of confusion while Amanda made the necessary telephone calls and then insisted Claire dismiss herself from the case, send in another nurse, and get busy with her packing.

The superintendent of nursing was very kind when Claire came in and offered her resignation and asked that it become effective at once. She, too, of course had known of Claire's love for Dr. Massey, and the pity in her eyes made Claire realize that she could not stay here and face that in the eyes of all her friends and associates.

"I hate to lose you, Claire," said Mrs. Webb gently. "You are a fine nurse, and if ever you want to come back, we'll be glad to have you."

Claire murmured her thanks hastily and was glad to escape.

Chapter Four

The next twenty-four hours were so crowded that when Claire went aboard the big freighter at Jacksonville, she had the dazed feeling that she was living in a dream from which she must surely awake soon and find that she and Rick were still members of the staff of Chatworth Memorial. The hours had been little more than a blur, and when she climbed the gangplank of the ship and followed the short, chunky steward down the companionway to a tiny cabin, she felt that all she wanted to do was crawl into the narrow but comfortable-looking bed and sleep for days.

Other passengers, who had sailed with the freighter from its home port of Boston, had gone ashore for the few hours of loading and unloading cargo, and as Claire leaned against the deck railing, looking down at the wharf, they began to

straggle back, smiling tentatively at her as they passed on their way to their own quarters.

A man came striding down the deck with an air of authority that told Claire, new to ocean-going as she was, that he was probably the captain. She turned, managing a faint smile, as he paused beside her.

"Well, hello," he greeted her, his very good-looking face, bronzed by sea and sun, making his teeth look even whiter as he smiled at her. "You must be the new passenger. I knew we were picking one up here, but I didn't dare hope she'd be young and beautiful."

The man's good looks were spectacular, his charm so obvious that Claire felt herself freeze up. After the stunning good looks and charm of Rick Massey she felt she never wanted to see another handsome man as long as she lived.

"I'm Claire Frazier," she told him coldly. "Miss Dawson had booked passage, but she is ill and sent me along in her place."

"I'm Curt Wayne, second officer." The man smiled at her. "I haven't met Miss Dawson, but I feel sure the Highland Queen is in luck, with you to replace her."

Claire's head went up and her eyes were cold.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Wayne," she said.

For a moment, obviously puzzled by her hostility, he studied her and then, frowning, turned to the gangplank as two women hurried up it, the one in front scolding the one who followed.

"Oh, there you are, Curt dear," said the woman who led the way, and gave him an enchanting smile. "Nora dawdled, so I was afraid you'd sail without us. I think the wretched girl would have been pleased if you had."

Curt laughed and offered his hand to help the woman down to the deck.

"Oh, we'd never have sailed without you, Mrs. Barclay, or your charming daughter," he said. And Claire wondered if it was only in her ears that the mockery sounded, as he

held his hand out to the younger woman, who carefully avoided it and jumped down to the deck unaided.

"Aren't you sweet?" Mrs. Barclay cooed, and glanced at Claire with blue eyes that chilled. "Oh, do we have a new passenger?"

"Mrs. Barclay, may I present Miss Frazier, who has just come aboard? And Miss Barclay, Miss Frazier." Curt's manner was as gracious and pleasant as though they stood in some formal drawing room.

"How do you do, Mrs. Barclay?" said Claire formally.

Mrs. Barclay made a gay little gesture of disclaimer.

"Oh, dear, not 'Mrs. Barclay'—shipboard is so informal," she protested. "Since we are all going to be together so long, why shouldn't we just begin by using first names? Mine's Vera, and my spoiled, naughty girl is Nora."

Clara managed a smile and said, "And I'm Claire."

If Curt Wayne had been an unpleasant reminder of Rick Massey's spectacular good looks, then Vera Barclay was a most unpleasant reminder of Elaine Crossett. She had the same carefully tended beauty, though Vera's hair was ruddy-gold and she was obviously older than Elaine; the same gaily coquettish air. A born man-hunter, Claire told herself grimly while they all chatted politely for a few minutes, and heaven help the man who didn't want to be hunted!

Nora was about eighteen, Claire decided as the girl stood sullenly aside, taking no part in the bright chit-chat between Curt and Vera. Her eyes were more gray than blue and her hair was plain carrot-red; she was plump and awkward-looking and her thin cotton dress clung in all the wrong places. Vera was smartly dressed, beautifully and deftly made-up, not quite as tall as Nora and with curves in all the right places.

Nora said suddenly, her tone sullen, "I'm going downstairs, Mother."

Without waiting for a word from Vera, she turned and strode down the deck, and Vera looked after her, sighing and shaking her head.

"My poor, poor baby," she mourned, and fluttered her eyelashes at Curt appealingly. "She didn't want to come on

this trip, but I simply *had* to get her away from that awful boy! A mere nobody—an oaf! But I'm afraid the baby hates her poor Mommie for insisting on this trip!"

Claire studied her curiously, wondering if any man could be simple enough to admire her. Looking up at Curt, she saw that he definitely did, and excused herself for a turn about the deck. As she walked away she heard Vera's light, musical laugh and set her teeth hard, walking faster to escape the sound.

As she turned along the deck, past the bridge, she collided violently with a small, slight man whose thin white hair was ruffled by the breeze and who was buttoned snugly inside a coat that seemed much too large for him and too heavy for the mildness of the day, even on the water.

She reached out swiftly, caught the slight figure and steadied it as she smiled with warm apology.

"I'm terribly sorry. That was very clumsy of me!"

The man smiled at her, his eyes watering a little behind his eyeglasses, his face ruddy with the wind, as he settled his hat more firmly on his head.

"It's quite all right, dear lady." He gave her a slight, old-fashioned bow, and his eyes were warm and friendly. "The fault was mine, I'm sure. I'm new to ships, and I have a bad habit of wandering about absent-mindedly. You're new with us, aren't you? I do hope you haven't been confined to your cabin with seasickness since we left port?"

Claire laughed. "Oh, no, I just came aboard," she told him, and added, "I'm new to ships too. This is my first ocean voyage!"

The man beamed happily. "Dear me, then perhaps we can be of service to each other. This voyage is the realization of a lifelong dream. I can scarcely believe I'm really here. And if I've enjoyed it so much, just coming down from Boston, what will it be like when we go through the Panama Canal, and then Hawaii and the Orient?"

"I shall be leaving the ship in Honolulu," Claire told him. "I'm going to visit my parents there."

"Oh, you'll miss some of the best part of the trip," pro-

tested the man. "I've been reading up on the ports where we are going. Of course, one of the charms of a freighter cruise is that you are never quite sure where you are going or when you'll get there. Sometimes, I understand, the captain gets an order to pick up cargo in some port not on the itinerary. I think that's fascinating, don't you?"

"I suppose so, unless you're in a hurry—"

"Oh, but, dear lady, if you are in a hurry you should never take a freighter," he protested earnestly. "Freighters are for people who want to take a vacation, a rest cure, get away from all the rush and bustle and hurly-burly of our much too modern world. Surely you must have realized that before you booked passage?"

"I didn't book passage," Claire explained carefully. "That was done by a patient of mine, who has a broken leg and is unable to travel—"

The little man looked swiftly about him and said very softly, "You are a nurse? An RN?"

Puzzled at his manner, Claire said, "Why, yes, but—"

"Let me advise you, my dear! Don't let anybody aboard know that!" His was the tone of a conspirator, and Claire, more puzzled than ever, stared at him.

"I can assure you," she said curtly, "nurses are accepted in even the most polite society. I see no reason why one should be snubbed aboard a freighter!"

The little man was so distressed he seemed on the point of tears.

"Oh, my dear young lady!" he protested anxiously. "How very clumsy of me—and you completely misunderstand me! I didn't mean to infer—Heavens, what a clumsy fool I am! I was only warning you that since the freighter carries twelve passengers, and neither a doctor nor an RN, the fact that you are a nurse may mean you'll be bothered by people who want to discuss their ailments and get free advice. I do hope you understand now why I said you shouldn't let them know you were an RN."

His distress was so acute, so appealing and so deeply sincere that Claire laughed forgivingly.

"You must forgive me for being edgy," she said gently. "Yes, of course I understand now what you meant."

The little man beamed happily.

"I'm so glad," he said, and looked it. And there was suddenly a merry twinkle in his faded eyes. "You'll be perfectly safe with me, young lady. I had a complete physical before I came aboard, and all the necessary injections—shots, I believe they are called—and I have a complete supply of first aid medicines. So you needn't be afraid I'll take advantage of your training to ask you to prescribe for me."

Claire, liking the little man more each moment, leaned towards him and said confidentially, "It would be a pleasure, any time, though I hope you won't need it."

The little man beamed happily.

"Oh, I'm sure I won't," he told her eagerly. "Of course, I was a bit seasick until we got past the Cape. It was very rough. I'd always heard that Cape Hatteras was a rough passage, and the weather was very bad, but I really think I brought it on myself, worrying about it and dreading it, you know. But the weather will be improving from now on, and I seem to have regained my sea legs."

"I'm so glad."

"I don't think the captain likes it very much when any of the passengers is unable to be at the table for meals," he said cheerfully. "The freighter lines claim they don't make any money on us—the passengers, you know. In fact, they claim they lose money on us. But they carry us for the crew's morale."

Claire looked puzzled, and he explained eagerly:

"I suppose they do get a bit bored and on each other's nerves on these long trips, so it's nice for them to see other people not connected with the ship except as passengers. That *does* sound rather logical, doesn't it?"

Claire laughed. "It does, at that. I'll try very hard not to miss any meals, lest the crew's morale suffers."

"I'm sure seeing you in the dining salon three times a day would be very uplifting for anyone's morale," the little

man told her with old-fashioned but quite sincere gallantry. "Oh, I'm being very rude; I'm Major Lesley, and I do hope I'm not boring you?"

"I'm Claire Frazier, and you aren't boring me a bit!" she assured him promptly. "You see, this trip came so unexpectedly; a week ago, the last thing in the world I would ever have dreamed was that I'd be aboard ship en route to Honolulu by now. So you must tell me about the things I should know."

Members of the crew, busy with their task of getting the big freighter down-river to the sea, glanced at them with friendly interest, and Claire smiled at them and saw some of the dark faces light up.

"Yes," murmured Major Lesley, eyes atwinkle, "you are going to be very good for the crew's morale. Just what the shipping lines ordered, I'm sure!"

Claire laughed. "Oh, but there's a lady aboard I'm sure will do a great deal more for their morale than I could!"

Oddly enough, Major Lesley's gaiety faded and his gray brows were drawn together in a slight scowl.

"Mrs. Barclay, you mean—the vivacious and charming Vera." There was a faint note of disapproval in his voice, and he looked up at Claire suddenly. "I have the oddest possible feeling that I've seen her before."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Major," Claire told him quietly. "There are a great many women scattered about the world who are as like her as peas in a pod. She's by no means unique, though I'm sure she'd hate me if she knew I said that."

Major Lesley nodded thoughtfully, his brows still drawn.

"Yes, of course it must be that," he admitted with a relief that Claire found puzzling. "I must have seen someone who resembles her. "I'd hate to think it was anything else."

"Then don't, Major!" Claire urged him gently. "If it's a disturbing memory, then throw it away. You don't want to spoil your trip with a puzzle like that."

"No, you're quite right, I don't," he agreed with relief. "It's just that in my former profession I was known for a

rather phenomenal memory for faces and names. But I'm retired now, so I don't have to keep on remembering if I don't want to, do I?"

"Of course you don't," Claire assured him, and smiled as they stood leaning against the railing, watching the landscape across the river slip past them as the Highland Queen set forth on her journey.

Chapter Five

The travel agent had assured Claire that informal dress was all that was required aboard a freighter like the Highland Queen, but when she entered the dining salon that evening, wearing a well-cut but not new sheer wool dress of brown-gold, her eyes widened as she saw Vera and Nora. They were in full formal attire, Vera's a filmy blue chiffon that would have looked better on a girl as young as Nora, while Nora wore a dark green sheath that only highlighted the carrot color of her hair and her freckles.

The steward smiled at Claire as he bowed her to her place at the captain's table, and Curt Wayne, standing with the other men, made the introduction.

"Miss Frazier, Captain Rodolfson," said Curt pleasantly. "Replacing Miss Dawson, who originally booked the passage but has suffered an accident and was unable to join us."

Captain Rodolfson, a big, grizzled man in his late fifties who was about to burst out of his white uniform, which had obviously been tailored for him when he was twenty pounds lighter, acknowledged the introduction, growled something that could have been mistaken for a welcome, and returned to his dinner.

It was Curt Wayne who performed the introductions to the rest of the passengers. There were two couples who had

obviously established friendly relations when they first boarded the ship at Boston. Both women were plump, middle-aged, cheerful; both husbands in their middle fifties, bearing the unmistakable stamp of men who had done well in their businesses and who were now retired. They were Mr. and Mrs. Burke from Milwaukee and Mr. and Mrs. Hennessy from Connecticut, but which was which Claire decided to leave until further acquaintance with them.

"I believe you have already met Mrs. Barclay and Miss Barclay," Curt said, and Vera gave Claire a dazzling but measuring smile, while Nora scarcely looked up from her plate. "And Major Lesley—"

Major Lesley gave Claire his little, old-fashioned bow and beamed.

"Oh, we've met, thank you," he said happily.

There were three other men, as different in appearance as it would be possible to imagine. They had just one thing in common—they were obviously not interested in a lone female passenger who had just joined the party. The twelfth passenger was a man in his middle twenties: sullen-looking, withdrawn, who barely glanced at Claire, nodded indifferently and went back to his dinner.

Mrs. Burke and Mrs. Hennessy were seated on either side of the captain, and their efforts to draw him into their gay and friendly chatter were hopeful but not unduly so. Listening to them as they chattered about their trip ashore at Jacksonville while the ship took on and disgorged cargo, Claire told herself she could understand the captain's refusal to be drawn into conversation with them. Their husbands were exchanging the kind of man-talk two men retired from business who had met for the first time could be expected to exchange.

Curt Wayne was at the foot of the table, and on his left Vera was being very vivacious, dropping her voice now and then to an intimate murmur as she leaned toward him and laughed gaily. Nora plowed her way stolidly through the excellent dinner with an appetite that matched that of the young man who sat to her left.

Surveying her fellow passengers, Claire was grateful that she had already struck up an acquaintance with Major Lesley. She could see no one else who offered any possibility of being a companion who could add to her enjoyment of the voyage.

Enjoyment! The word struck at her with unleashed claws, and for a moment she felt slightly sick. How could she expect to enjoy anything when the shadow of Rick's jilting was so black around her? It had all happened so suddenly, without a moment's warning, that she was still dazed and confused by it.

She drew a deep, hard breath, fighting with everything within her against the desolate feeling that swept over her, feeling tears clogging her throat, despising herself that she could so poorly control her emotions.

"Here," murmured a voice beside her, and a hand slid a bottle of horseradish before her. "The stuff's not so bad if you put enough of this on it to kill the taste."

Startled, Claire turned her head and discovered the morose young man seated beside her, and her color deepened.

"Oh, thank you, I don't need that. The food is delicious," she said faintly.

"So why aren't you eating it, then?" asked the man, his eyes dark and sullen.

"Because I'm not really hungry," she answered with spirit. "I had a late lunch in Jacksonville."

"Not feeling the motion, are you?" he probed dryly.

"The motion?"

He grinned so unexpectedly that she was startled by the transformation it made in his lean, homely face.

"Don't lie and say you are, because there isn't any motion," he assured her firmly. "The sea's like a mill-pond, and there's only the vibration of the engines, so you can't be seasick."

"And who said I was?"

"Hi, put down that gun," the young man ordered sternly. "I'm only trying to be sociable, like it says in the brochures

—a small passenger list so everybody can be palsy-walsy. Personally, I find that a loathsome phrase, don't you?"

Claire was being lifted somewhat out of her dark pit of desolation by the man's brashness and even managed a faint attempt at a laugh.

"Well, let's just say it's scarcely my favorite phrase," she agreed.

The man nodded. "I knew you were the sensible sort." He seemed to congratulate himself for his perspicacity.

"That, my friend, as you should surely know, is the most deadly insult you can offer to any woman, whether she's six or sixty!" she assured him firmly.

He looked quite surprised.

"It is, now?" he marveled. "Funny, so few women deserve it I'd consider it a sort of—well, accolade."

"Then you obviously don't know much about women," Claire assured him, and was startled at the sudden change that came over his face, making it dark and morose and seeming to add years to it.

"That's pretty obvious, isn't it?" he admitted grimly. "I never realized just how little I knew about them until I came back from overseas—"

He checked himself with an almost physical effort and returned to his neglected dinner.

Claire studied him for a moment and then probed gently, "So this isn't your first trip abroad?"

The man gave a sound that was halfway between a chuckle and a snort.

"The first one for which I ever paid my own passage," he admitted. "Our kindly old uncle in the striped pants and the high hat took care of all expenses on the other trip. This time, I thought I'd like to pick my own route and my own destination. And besides, I'm writing a book."

Claire said, gently mocking, "Isn't everybody?"

"You've got a point there," he agreed. "But I decided it would be cheaper to 'get away from it all' aboard a slow boat to China than to hang around New York and freeze to death. Why are *you* making this trip?"

Claire laughed. "Well, I'm not writing a book," she assured him.

"Congratulations! Then why?" he persisted. "And don't tell me it's none of my business for when you come aboard on one of these junkets, your business is everybody's business. So—why are you taking the trip?"

"Partly a vacation, partly to visit my parents in Honolulu," she answered, and could not quite keep the curtness out of her voice.

She studied him for a moment and then asked, "Would I dare ask about your book? Its subject, I mean? What it's about?"

The man made an airy gesture and leaned away so that the steward could remove his plate and put his dessert in front of him.

"Oh, I haven't decided yet," he said carelessly. "But I'm sure it will be an earth-shaking idea when I catch it by the tail, as I'm sure I will while this voyage progresses."

"So, without the faintest idea what you're going to write about, you are already developing yourself as a 'character' because you are so sure your book is going to make you famous?" Claire asked.

"That's right."

"And rich, of course?"

"Of course."

Claire laughed so suddenly that for a moment the man looked puzzled and then he grinned, too.

"Sounds pretty fantastic, doesn't it?" he agreed with her laughter good-humoredly.

"I have to admit it does," Claire confessed.

"Well, don't be too surprised when you pick up a bright-jacketed book and read the author's name—MacEwen Russell."

"Oh, is that your name?"

"Well, of course. Handsome Harry introduced us."

His slight nod toward Curt told her who he meant, and Claire caught Curt's eye and saw that he was studying her

with a curious intentness. She turned back to the man beside her, her chin slightly in the air.

"And you're Claire Frazier," said MacEwen. "See? I remembered your name. But then that was easy; you are the only good-looking gal aboard—"

"There's Mrs. Barclay and her daughter."

MacEwen studied Vera and Nora and shuddered.

"Like I said," he insisted, "you are the only good-looking gal aboard—

"And you'd be a very smart gal if you kept your pretty little paws off Handsome Harry," MacEwen went on grimly, "on account of the Barclay dame has branded him as her very own. And it couldn't have happened to two more deserving people. They deserve each other, don't you think?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know," Claire said diplomatically. "You see, I don't really know either of them. She is beautiful, though."

The other men rose politely as she stood up, all except the captain, who seemed lost in not too pleasant thought. And Claire was glad to escape to her cabin and solitude.

Chapter Six

The night was gusty and windy, though clear, and overhead the stars swam in a bowl of blue so dark that it was like velvet. Claire leaned on the rail, her coat drawn about her shoulders, and was lost in her thoughts when a voice spoke from the gloom behind her and she turned, startled, to see in the faint light from the cabin behind her Curt Wayne.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" His tone was as routine as the words. "It will be much better a few nights from now, as we get closer to the tropics."

"No doubt." Her voice was curt as she turned back to the rail.

"Are you enjoying your trip, Miss Frazier?" he asked politely.

"Oh, yes, thank you."

There was a brief silence, and then he said quietly, "I hope you won't let Russell bother you, Miss Frazier. I saw him talking to you at dinner. He's a—well, a rather peculiar person. Seems to have a 'down' on the whole world—"

"I didn't find him like that at all, Mr. Wayne," Claire said coolly. "As a matter of fact, I found him quite interesting. He's writing a book, you know. I suppose all writers are a bit peculiar or they'd be living instead of writing about it, don't you think?"

"Matter of fact, I'm afraid I'd never given the subject much thought," Curt answered. "We frequently carry writers on our passenger lists. Usually they're rather run-of-the-mill human beings. Russell seems to fancy himself as a 'character.' That's usually the mark of a would-be writer who just talks about writing and never does any."

"I thought you'd never given the matter much thought," she mocked him with a touch of acid.

There was a tiny silence, and then Curt said politely, "I only meant, Miss Frazier, that I hoped he wouldn't annoy you. It's part of my responsibility toward the passengers to see that they have a pleasant time."

"Oh, I'm sure they do, Mr. Wayne."

"It is, at least, something we all hope for."

"Even the captain, who hates passengers and considers them merely a necessary evil and very much wishes they weren't necessary?"

"Oh, you do the captain an injustice, Miss Frazier," Curt protested lightly. "It's just that he—well, he isn't very sociable by nature. After forty years on a freighter, and with passengers only introduced to the line a few years ago, I suppose he feels that his responsibility is to navigate the ship, see to it the cargo reaches its destination without loss—"

"So he keeps you to attend to the social activities?" There was a sneer in her voice that obviously puzzled Curt.

He stood with his back to what faint light there was so she could only guess at his expression, and when he spoke she could detect the chill in his voice.

"I'm not sure just how to take that, Miss Frazier. You sound as though you considered me as a sort of gigolo."

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Wayne," she mocked, but made no effort to put conviction into her voice. "But it really isn't a bit important to me. I'm here on a vacation, a leisurely trip to Honolulu, and perfectly capable of entertaining myself. So please have no feeling of responsibility toward me."

Before he could answer that, Vera Barclay stepped out on the deck, saying gaily, "Oh, Curt dear, I'm so sorry I kept you waiting, but that poor, silly child of mine—" She broke off as she became aware of Claire and said hastily, "Oh, it must be Claire. I saw the other women in the salon playing bridge. Don't you play, Claire?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

"Oh, that's too bad. I'm afraid you'll be bored."

"There's no danger of that. This is my first freighter cruise, and I expect to enjoy every moment of it." Claire spoke as much to Curt as to Vera.

"Oh, well, it's my first, too, and I don't want to waste time with cards." Vera laughed vivaciously. "Shall we go, Curt dear?"

Curt said politely, without warmth, "Will you join us, Miss Frazier, for the traditional three times around the deck?"

"Oh, yes, do," said Vera as politely and with as little warmth.

"Thanks, no. Not tonight."

"Well, then—" Vera did not take the trouble even to mask her relief as she slid her hand through Curt's arm and drew him away.

"Good night, Miss Frazier," said Curt over his shoulder, and Claire said, "Good night. Have fun."

She stood watching them as they moved away. When they passed beneath a light farther down the deck, she could

see Vera clinging to his arm, her face lifted, the light bright on her ruddy-gold hair beneath the soft web of a chiffon scarf tied coquettishly beneath her chin. Curt's handsome head was bent toward her as he listened, and their laughter flowed back to her.

She turned and went back into the companionway. En route to her own cabin, she stopped in the salon where she had seen several shelves of books and scanned their titles to find something that would ease the hours until she could hope for sleep.

She glanced at the card players as she passed and noticed that Major Lesley was absorbed in a poker game with a slowly accumulating stack of chips in front of him to denote his winning streak, while the stack in front of MacEwen was dwindling as he scowled at his cards.

She found a book she had meant to read and went out of the salon and down the corridor toward her own cabin. As she passed the door of the adjoining cabin, she heard strangled sobs that stopped her for a moment. Behind that door, someone was weeping with the abandon of a heartbroken child, and without a moment's hesitation, she knocked lightly at the door.

The sobbing ceased on a caught breath, and momentarily there was silence in the cabin.

"What do you want?" demanded a harsh, tear-sodden voice.

"Is there anything wrong? Can I be of help?" For the moment Claire had forgotten she was not back in the hospital, where any sound of distress called her to instant and helpful attention.

The door was yanked violently open and Nora stood there, her plump face raddled with tears, her eyes blazing.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" she blazed furiously.

"I'm sorry, but I heard you crying—" Claire began.

"So what?" snapped Nora belligerently, her voice wobbling slightly. "Is it against the law to cry if I want to and feel like it?"

"Of course not," Claire said gently. "For two cents, I'd join you and we'd both have a bang-up time weeping on each other's shoulders."

"What have you got to cry about?" Nora tried to sneer, but the tears were slipping down her plump face and her mouth was tremulous.

"You'd be surprised, Nora," said Claire gently. "Maybe something like what you're crying about—"

Nora took a backward step, and uncontrollably her free hand slid up to touch an ugly mark on her cheek, and something akin to panic showed behind the tears in her eyes.

"You don't know what you're talking about—" she said, and banged the door shut in Claire's startled face.

Claire stood there for a moment, and then she shrugged and went on to her own door.

"Let that be a lesson to you, my girl," she reminded herself dryly as she made ready for bed. "You're not in the hospital now, and any storm, strife and tears among the passengers is no affair of yours. So keep your nose out of other people's affairs."

The morning dawned gloriously gold and blue, and Claire found her fellow guests already assembled at breakfast when she came in from a brief turn around the deck. All save Vera who hurried in a few minutes later, looking young and slender and lovely in powder-blue slacks, a cardigan a shade deeper in blue swung about her shoulders over a thin cashmere shirt.

"Did anybody ever see such a glorious morning?" she caroled gaily as she slid into her seat on Curt's left and gave him a smile as beaming as the morning. "And just imagine! I can't get that lazy child of mine up to enjoy it. She's such a sleepy-head. I can tell you it was a proud day for me when she graduated from high school and I was spared the terrible burden of dragging her out of bed and seeing she got off to school on time."

She looked about the table, inviting them all to share her mirth at the memory. But Mrs. Hennessy and Mrs. Burke exchanged meaningful glances that indicated they would

have been able to cope with such a problem, and without any nonsense either.

Major Lesley, seated beside Claire, was across the table from Vera, and covertly Vera studied him, even as she chattered gaily and intimately with Curt, until at last she leaned forward and addressed herself directly to Major Lesley.

"I suppose it's silly of me, Major," her smile was almost as warm and winning as the ones she showered so freely on Curt, "but I have the craziest feeling that I've met you somewhere before. Have I?"

Claire looked curiously at Major Lesley, remembering his own words about seeing Vera before. But the Major merely smiled and gave Vera his slight, old-fashioned bow.

"Oh, I'm sure we've never met before, Mrs. Barclay," he said politely. "I'm certain I would have remembered so charming a lady."

"Well, aren't you sweet?" purred Vera. And Claire could not be sure, but she felt that Vera was somehow relieved as she turned back to Curt and went on with her low-voiced, intimate murmuring.

Later, as Claire paced the deck, pausing now and then at the rail to breathe deeply of the fragrant, salt-tangy morning, to revel in the blue of the cloudless, sun-drenched sky, the water that was even bluer, broken only by the thin white wash that sped back from the ship's prow, Major Lesley spoke at her elbow.

"Oh, hello, Major." She was touched by his eager face that was like that of a child not too sure of its welcome. "This is a morning new-made and offered to us on a golden platter, and isn't it glorious?"

Major Lesley lifted his head, crowned by the incongruously sporty cap, and sniffed with childlike delight.

"And they're probably having a blizzard back in Chicago," he said happily.

"I imagine it's pretty cold back home," Claire agreed and could not keep back the question, "Why did you tell Vera you were sure you'd never seen her before?"

Major Lesley gave her a swift glance and looked away.

"Oh, I don't think I quite said that, Miss Frazier," he protested. "I said I was quite sure I'd never *met* her before. And I haven't."

Claire smiled at him. "That sounds a bit cagey, Major."

Major Lesley answered courteously but firmly, "I'm afraid it does, Miss Frazier, but it will have to be left like that, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," Claire answered, feeling as if she had been smacked, very gently and very politely, but smacked just the same. "It's none of my business, of course. I didn't mean to be nosy."

"I'm sure you didn't, Miss Frazier. And if I were sure—" He broke off and looked oddly uncomfortable and Claire changed the subject.

"You seemed to be having fun last night. Did you win everybody's money?" Her tone was light but quite friendly.

Major Lesley chortled happily.

"Nearly enough, I'm afraid, for the others to suspect me of being a card shark," he boasted. "It was just beginner's luck, a winning streak. They'll get it all back tonight, I'm sure."

"Then you shouldn't play tonight." Claire laughed as she tucked her hand through his arm and walked with him along the deck.

"Oh, I must." He seemed shocked by the thought that he could avoid it. "I have to give them the chance to get their money back."

"And if your winning streak fails you tonight?"

"Oh, I can only lose twenty dollars, at the worst," he told her happily. "That's my allowance. Once I lose twenty dollars, the game is over for me."

"You're a smart man, Major!" Claire applauded him.

"There are men who should never gamble," Major Lesley said, so unexpectedly grim that Claire glanced at him curiously. "Men like that young MacEwen Russell, for instance. He's got no business playing poker! He's a very bad poker player. He loses his temper and plays recklessly, and that's no good. You have to play as though you didn't care

whether you lost or won, as if you were playing purely for sport. He doesn't; he played for blood! That's why I have to play again tonight and give him a chance to win back what he lost."

"But how can you be sure he won't just lose again?"

"I can't be." Major Lesley was deeply distressed. "That's just the trouble. I have to get his money back to him, and I don't know any other way he'd accept it. Can you think of any?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Major, unless you just go to him frankly and offer to return it—"

"I did that last night," said Major Lesley. "You see, he and I are cabin mates; I felt very badly about winning such a large sum from him, and I told him so frankly and offered to return it. He was much offended and quite abusive."

"Then I wouldn't worry about it," Claire counseled.

"But you see, I have to worry about it, because I'm sure that he can't afford to lose that much in a single evening with the trip just beginning." Major Lesley's distress was so evident that Claire found it touching. "Why, we've got weeks and weeks to go on the cruise, and there will be places he will want to go ashore; and unless he has a few dollars in his pocket, it could be most unpleasant for him."

"Well, maybe you are wrong about him, Major. Maybe he has more money than you think he has," Claire suggested hopefully.

Major Lesley shook his head and clutched at the incongruously sporty cap that a vagrant breeze tried to wrest from his head.

"No, I'm sure he hasn't," he dismissed the thought. "I'm a very good judge of people, Miss Frazier. My profession has taught me that if nothing else. MacEwen is a young man who has had a hard blow and who is bitter against the whole world; reckless, in fact a trifle desperate—"

"Oh, come now, Major," Claire tried to comfort the little man. "I talked to him at dinner last night, and he told me he had taken this trip in order to write a book."

"That's all foolishness, of course," Major Lesley brushed that aside. "Why, he hasn't even got a typewriter with him."

"Oh, hasn't he?" Claire found that as surprising as the Major did. "Then I'm sure he doesn't plan to write one in longhand—"

They had been so absorbed that they had not realized MacEwen was walking behind them until he spoke, and his angry voice jerked them around to face him. He stood with his clenched fists jammed tightly into his jacket pockets, his eyes wrathful.

"And what makes you two think I couldn't write a book in longhand if I wanted to?" he demanded furiously. "And as for you, Major—which I very much doubt you are—you can give me back the money you won from me last night if you want to admit you were playing crooked poker."

Claire said spiritedly, "Oh, come now, Mr. Russell, what an outrageous thing to say."

MacEwen's eyes flicked her and dismissed her and returned to Major Lesley.

"All right, Major, do you want to admit you were cheating?" he demanded.

Major Lesley studied him and then looked away as he fumbled in his pocket and brought out his wallet, a very handsome pigskin affair with gold edges and a monogram in gold. Anything less like the meek, shabby little man than that wallet would have been hard to visualize.

"Why, yes, Russell, if you insist." He thumbed some bills from the wallet and held them out hesitantly to the other man.

"If you won the money by playing honestly, then I won't accept it," MacEwen Russell told him sharply. "But if you were cheating, then you can return my money and what you won from the others. And hereafter, stay the blazes away from all of us in the evening. Is that clear?"

Claire was distressed and puzzled as she saw Major Lesley nod and MacEwen Russell's hand shoot out and grab the money. As he thrust it into his own well-worn wallet, his

eyes swept over Major Lesley, and they were bitter with contemptuous amusement.

"I must admit, you little pipsqueak, that you're far from being my idea of a card shark," he growled. "But then I suppose that's a part of your stock in trade, the thing that makes strangers willing to play with you without suspecting any crookedness."

Major Lesley peered at him short-sightedly behind his spectacles, and there was no expression whatever on his face.

"Why, yes, I suppose you might call it that," he agreed meekly.

MacEwen glared at him and then at Claire.

"Nice company you keep, Miss Frazier," he drawled, and strode off down the deck.

Claire watched him go, and then she turned to Major Lesley accusingly.

"Major, you know that's not true! Why did you lie to him and let him believe you played crooked poker?" she demanded sharply.

Major Lesley peered up at her, and there was a childish happiness in his eyes that was reflected in his voice when he said, "*You* don't believe I'm a card shark, Miss Frazier?"

"Well, of course not!"

Major Lesley beamed happily.

"Why, that's very kind of you, my dear. Very kind indeed. I'm most grateful!" he told her eagerly.

Chapter Seven

In mid-afternoon Claire discovered deck chairs tucked into a sheltered corner near the stern, and here she tucked herself in for an hour or so with a book. But she was half-asleep and the book lay neglected in her lap when she

heard a footfall and then a small, startled gasp and looked up to see Nora standing there, looking down at her with obvious distaste.

The girl wore a scarf tied over her head, and a thin wool sweater, a brief skirt of denim, and knee-length stockings of white cotton. She looked awkward and plump and as nearly homely as a young girl can look. The ugly bruise on her cheek had been carefully covered with powder and make-up, but to Claire's experienced eyes it was still apparent.

The girl turned to go away, and Claire said curtly, "Oh, why don't you sit down, Nora? There are chairs for half a dozen of us. And I don't bite, I promise."

"No," said Nora nastily, "you just go around asking snoopy questions."

"Not any more," Claire drawled. "Whatever happens to you, and whatever you do or don't do, is no affair of mine. I couldn't care less. If you want to sit down, that's fine and dandy. If you don't—well, that's your business. But don't think I'm going to retire humbly and leave you here all by yourself."

Nora hesitated, and then she dropped, like a bundle of wet wash, into a chair as far from Claire's as possible and stared straight ahead. Claire went back to her book, and silence settled between them.

Once or twice she glanced covertly at the girl, who sat with her head against the back rest of the chair, her eyes on the white wake of water left behind by the ship's progress.

At last Nora pulled herself erect and glared at Claire.

"Why did you come on this foul trip?" she demanded sharply.

Claire raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"Because I wanted to, why else?" she drawled.

"Lucky you! Old enough to do what you want without somebody dragging you around making you do what you don't want—" Nora's teeth set hard and a tear slid from her eye and made a path down her cheek.

"I suppose I am lucky, at that," Claire said quietly. "But even people as old as I am have problems, you know."

Nora turned swiftly.

"Oh, I didn't mean you are old," she stammered with swift, child-like contrition. "You're not, at all! You're just old enough to find life interesting."

"Well, thanks." Claire smiled at the girl. "Interesting? Nora, I'll let you in on a little secret. Life can be other than interesting, even at my advanced age."

"Now you're laughing at me!" Nora was outraged.

"I'm not at all, you foolish child."

"I'm not a child—I'm almost nineteen! Old enough to know what I want, but too young to get my way."

"I'll let you in on another secret, Nora. We never get old enough to have our way about everything," Claire assured her. "This young man you were in love with—"

Nora whirled on her in outraged surprise.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded sharply.

Claire made a little gesture of dismissal and lifted her book.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I forgot my promise not to pry into your affairs," she said briefly.

"Who told you I was in love with somebody?" Nora insisted furiously.

Claire eyed her coolly.

"You surely must have heard your mother, the afternoon you came aboard—was that only yesterday?" she answered quietly. "She seemed to feel the young man was most unsuitable—" She broke off, because Nora had tipped her head back and was laughing raucously, harshly.

"Unsuitable!" Nora choked on the word. "As if any man who would give me a second glance could possibly be unsuitable—"

"That's enough, Nora," said Vera's voice above them, and Claire, watching the girl, saw her shrink as though she expected a blow. "If you can't behave yourself and control that loose tongue of yours, then I'm sure you would

be much happier in our cabin. Miss Frazier will excuse you, I'm sure."

Nora scrambled awkwardly from her chair and slid away out of sight. Claire could hear the girl's running footsteps on the deck until they ended at the companionway door.

Vera stood quite still, studying Claire with a cool gaze in which animosity rode high.

"That was contemptible of you, Miss Frazier." She let the words drop like small iced pebbles into the pool of silence left by Nora's flight.

Claire met the angry, hostile eyes coolly.

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea what you mean, Mrs. Barclay," she answered calmly.

"You needn't lie—" Vera began furiously.

"My dear Mrs. Barclay," said Claire in a tone she had occasionally used at the hospital to an obstreperous patient or a visitor, "I am not lying. I simply do not know what you're talking about. What have I done that was contemptible?"

"Luring my poor baby out here, to probe and pry into her private affairs and mine!" Vera's tone was ugly as a whip-lash.

Claire looked her over with cool deliberation, and Vera, bitterly resenting the fact that Claire wasn't going to fight, rushed on. "Last night after dinner she stumbled and struck her cheek against the head of the bed. I'm sure that the pain was intense: like the child she is, she cried. And she tells me you practically forced your way into the room—"

"Now, that, whether you're quoting Nora or saying it of your own accord, *is* a lie," Claire cut in, and her own eyes were angry now. "I heard her crying and I stopped to see if there was anything I could do for her. That's all."

The two women eyed each other for an angry moment, and then Claire said quietly, "It's odd, but I can't imagine how falling against the end of the bed could cause a mark on her cheek so much like the fingers of a hand that had just dealt an ugly blow."

For a moment Vera went rigid, and her color beneath

the careful make-up faded so that for the first time she looked what she was; a woman in her late forties, not the thirties as she had hoped.

"That is an outrageous thing to say, Miss Frazier," she blazed at last. "Are you daring to insinuate that Nora slapped her own face?"

"Of course not," said Claire quietly.

"Then who—" For the first time Vera's eyes would not quite meet Claire's.

"That's pretty obvious, don't you think, Mrs. Barclay?" Claire pointed out.

Vera had managed to recover somewhat from the shock, and now her manner was coldly haughty, though her eyes still held the wariness that would not quite let them meet Claire's cool regard.

"Are you daring to suggest that I'd strike my baby?" Vera demanded, and tried to manage a laugh. "When I just about worship her? When there's nothing I wouldn't do for her? You're no longer insulting; now you're just absurd, utterly ridiculous."

"There's nothing you wouldn't do for her—except the one thing that would make her happy?" asked Claire, and there was a cool curiosity in her voice.

Cautiously Vera asked, "And may I ask what that is?"

"You said yourself you dragged her on this voyage to get her away from a 'most unsuitable young man' with whom she fancied herself in love," Claire reminded her.

She could detect the relief that touched Vera at her words and was puzzled by it.

"Oh, that," said Vera, and dismissed the wariness that had been for so long in her eyes. "Oh, yes, of course. That was the real reason for the voyage. But I thought that after leaving high school Nora should see something of the world, and I felt she would see a lot more of it on a freighter passenger cruise than on one of the big luxury liners."

"No doubt you're quite right," said Claire politely, her tone indicating her complete weariness with the subject as

she picked up her book once more. "And now if you'll excuse me?"

Chapter Eight

The following morning before breakfast when she was walking around the deck, Claire all but collided with the steward, emerging hastily from the companionway, a first-aid kit in his hands.

"Oh, excuse me, miss," he apologized hastily, and started past her, obviously in a hurry and very agitated.

"Is something wrong?" Claire asked, her eyes on the white box with its significant red cross.

"One of the crew, miss, has had a bad accident."

"Perhaps I can help." Claire joined him in his race towards the stairs that led down to the engine room, and when he slowed his step and looked at her, puzzled, she added swiftly, "I'm a registered nurse."

"Oh, then you can help, miss. We'd all be very grateful," the steward assured her eagerly with obvious relief.

They hurried together down the stairs to the engine room, where several of the crew had gathered about a man who huddled in a battered chair, his face white beneath the grime and the sun-tan.

He was badly burned about the arm and shoulder, and as Claire hurried to him, Curt Wayne turned, saw her and frowned.

"You're out of bounds for passengers, Miss Frazier—" he began.

"She's a nurse, sir," the steward said eagerly.

"Oh—well, in that case—" Curt looked bewildered as she brushed past him and bent over the man.

"It hurts like the dickens, doesn't it?" Claire's voice was

low-pitched, warm and sweet as she examined the extent of the burns, her fingers gentle as a butterfly's wings while she probed so delicately that the man scarcely winced. "Well, we've got something that will ease the pain and make you a lot more comfortable."

"The clumsy fool—" Curt raged.

Claire turned on him, a young fury.

"Why don't you go away?" she demanded shortly. "You're being no help whatever here. When the man has recovered, then you can bully him, but not now. I will not permit you to speak to my patient like that."

"Your patient?" Curt was very aware of the faces of the crew, gathered about the injured man. "He's a member of my crew."

"He's a member of the human race, and he's in great pain. Why don't you go away some place?" Claire resumed her treatment of the man, and when she had made him comfortable, she smiled at him warmly. "You're going to be quite all right very soon. Perhaps you'd like to be put ashore at the nearest port and go into a hospital?"

The man, a grizzled middle-aged man, grinned bashfully up at her.

"No, ma'am, thank you kindly. They couldn't do me any more good than you have. I'm sorry to be a trouble to you," he answered.

"Nonsense." Claire's smile was warmly friendly. "There's nothing an RN likes better than to feel she's being of service in her profession, and I'll see you again this afternoon. If the pain comes back, you send for me, you hear?"

"Well, thank you, ma'am, that's mighty kind of you," said the man.

Claire stowed the articles she had used neatly in the kit and smiled pleasantly at the crew, before she turned and started back up the ladder to the upper deck.

She didn't know that Curt had followed her until, as she stood on the deck, he spoke at her elbow.

"That was a fine job you did, Miss Frazier."

She looked up at him swiftly and saw nothing but honest admiration in his eyes.

"It was a pretty routine emergency," she told him curtly. "We had a lot of those in the hospital."

"So you are a registered nurse," said Curt thoughtfully.

"I do hope you don't mind," she said sweetly.

Gravely, Curt leaned forward and flicked with a thumb and finger first at her left shoulder and then at her right. When she looked at him, bewildered, hostile, he grinned boyishly.

"Getting rid of the chips you were wearing on your shoulders when you came aboard," he explained solemnly, though there was a faint twinkle in his blue eyes. "I can't quite imagine just why you arrived with your fighting clothes on. So far as I can remember, I've done absolutely nothing to justify your treatment. You have been civil enough to some of the other passengers, even to Captain Rodolfson. Me, you seem to despise. Could I dare ask what I've done to offend you?"

Claire had the grace to be faintly ashamed of her behavior.

"You haven't done a thing, Mr. Wayne, and I apologize for being so unpleasant," she said awkwardly. "It's just that—well, somehow, I just don't seem to like breath-takingly handsome men any more."

Curt stared down at her, his brows caught together in a puzzled frown.

"That's a loaded remark if I ever heard one," he observed at last and smiled at her. "Like the old question, 'Have you stopped beating your wife'? If I ask why you don't like—what was the expression you used, breath-takingly handsome men?—that marks me as a conceited oaf; yet I would like very much to be friends with you, if I may."

"That would be very nice," said Claire without warmth.

"But not very likely, judging from your tone?"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, no, you didn't, but your tone implied as much," said Curt. And suddenly, as though he found the whole conversation getting out of hand, he added briskly, "Well, what-

ever happened to get you down on men, he was an utter fool, I'll say that for him."

Claire caught her breath and stared up at him speechlessly.

"I mean, of course," he answered the question in her eyes that she would not put into words, "whoever the man was who hurt you enough to turn you sour on the whole sex."

He turned without another word and went briskly about his duties, and a little later Claire realized that breakfast was being served and went into the salon.

The steward greeted her like a long-lost friend and waited on her with an assiduity that made the other passengers look at her curiously. The steward had been attentive to his duties throughout the trip, but this morning his attention to Claire was almost embarrassing.

Major Lesley, beside her when the steward had brought fresh hot toast, smiled at Claire and said quietly, "Whatever you've done for him—"

"One of the crew had had an accident." Claire spoke so that the whole table of passengers could hear her. "A very bad burn, and I helped take care of him. You see, I'm a registered nurse."

The others were immediately interested, and Major Lesley reminded her humorously, "I warned you not to let that become known."

"The man was badly hurt and I was glad to do what I could for him," Claire answered quietly.

The steward came up then, smiling warmly at Claire.

"The captain's compliments, miss, and he'd be honored if you would have lunch with him in his quarters," he announced.

Claire said quickly, "That's very kind of him, but—"

"You can't refuse, my dear," Major Lesley said, before the steward could speak. "It's a sort of royal command, and one any of the other passengers would give a lot to receive. Tell the captain Miss Frazier accepts with pleasure."

The steward touched his cap brim and departed.

Claire looked up at Major Lesley.

"Well, now, really." She was faintly annoyed.

"Did I seem unduly presumptuous, Miss Frazier? I'm sorry. I had no such intention," Major Lesley apologized like an abashed schoolboy. "It's just that I was afraid you didn't realize how much of a compliment the captain was paying you."

Chapter Nine

The steward opened the door of the captain's quarters, stood aside for Claire to enter and announced as though she had been a royal personage, "Miss Frazier, sir."

Captain Rodolfson greeted her with a touch of old world courtesy for which she was not prepared, because he had seemed gruff and stern at dinner when she had seen him.

He motioned her to a chair, offered her a tiny glass of very dry sherry and smiled at her.

"Curt tells me we are deeply in your debt, Miss Frazier," he began, as he lifted his sherry in a little silent toast to her.

"Oh, please, Captain, you and Mr. Wayne are much too kind," Claire assured him lightly. "In my profession, treating even such serious burns is almost a routine matter. The crewman should be quite all right in a couple of weeks."

"You don't think we should put him ashore in a hospital, or transfer him to another ship that has a doctor aboard?"

"Not unless you feel some doubt as to my ability to look after him," Claire answered. "Which, of course, I expect to do, with your permission."

"But we couldn't ask that of a passenger, Miss Frazier." The captain was shocked at the idea.

"You aren't asking it, Captain," Claire reminded him.

"I'm offering because I am a nurse and always glad to be of service in any way that my profession dictates."

"Well, it's very kind of you," said Captain Rodolfson, studying her with a sharp intentness. "I regret very much I haven't had the opportunity to get to know you better. Curt gets all the social duties aboard."

"And performs them beautifully, Captain," she said smoothly.

Captain Rodolfson seemed to notice nothing amiss in her tone and nodded, smiling.

"Yes, Curt's quite a lad, isn't he?" he agreed. "He'll make a very fine captain, I'm sure, when he takes over for me."

Claire looked up at him, startled.

"You're retiring, Captain?" she asked. "I'd no idea you had reached retirement age."

A small, wizened monkey of a man in immaculate white coat and trousers was setting up the luncheon table, and the captain sat beside Claire and lowered his voice.

"I have a shocking confession to make, Miss Frazier, and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it confidential."

"Well, of course, Captain—"

"I'm tired of the sea and ships!"

Claire laughed. "Oh, I can't believe that, Captain."

He grinned, his teeth faintly gleaming through his close-cropped, grizzled mustache.

"I know it sounds shocking," he admitted. "But after fifty-five years at a job—I ran away to sea as a cabin boy when I was ten!"

"And you never married?" asked Claire, so interested that she did not realize she was being inquisitive.

A sort of shadow dropped over the ruddy face and his eyes went dark and bitter.

"Oh, yes, I married. My wife went to sea with me. She was washed overboard in a storm on the China Sea fifteen years ago."

"I'm sorry, Captain—"

"It was a long time ago," he answered quietly. "One learns to adjust to bereavement, or one goes under."

"I know," said Claire huskily, and the thought of Rick was a hurt in her heart.

"You, too, have lost someone dear to you?" probed the captain gently.

There was a mist of tears in Claire's eyes as she managed a smile.

"Someone very dear," she agreed, and set her teeth hard.

The wizened, monkey-like little man murmured something, and the captain stood up and waved Claire to the table.

The food served to her was delicious and more than ample; her eyes widened as the cabin servant placed a bowl containing one toasted wheat biscuit and a small jug of milk in front of the captain.

"You see now, Miss Frazier, why I appear at only one meal in the salon?" The captain indicated the scanty fare before him. "I'm allowed only one meal a day and I take that in the salon. This cardboard stuff I'm allowed to eat at mid-day would, I'm afraid, destroy the appetites of my passengers and crew. So I consume my fodder in here in privacy. I hope you'll protect my secret?"

There was a twinkle in his eyes, and Claire laughed.

"I'm not sure I can promise that, Captain," she answered lightly. "The word is out that the reason you don't eat with the passengers is that you despise them and wish it wasn't necessary for the ship to carry them."

The captain looked startled.

"Really? Is that what they think?" he marveled.

"It's what I was told," Claire assured him, laughing.

"Well, there's not a word of truth in that statement," protested the captain. "I enjoy the passengers very much—that is, some of them. We seem to have a pretty average crowd aboard this time. Curt tells me that there was some unpleasantness about a poker game the first night out."

He was watching Claire with a curious intentness, and Claire's head went up.

"Would you like to know the truth about that, Captain?" she asked quietly. "Is that why you asked me to lunch? To check up on the passengers?"

Captain Rodolfson's eyes flashed with angry surprise.

"My dear young lady!" There was a snap in his voice. "I can assure you that any checking up on the passengers that may be required is well attended to by Curt and the steward, Carl."

"I'm sorry," said Claire briefly.

"And so am I, for your misunderstanding," the Captain told her. "I merely happened to mention that we apparently had a card shark aboard, and that, of course, is something we simply will not allow. The man will be put ashore at a Caribbean port—"

"Oh, no, you mustn't do that! You'll break his heart! Why, he's been planning this trip, dreaming of it, saving for it for years!" Claire protested swiftly.

"His passage money will be refunded."

"Oh, Captain, please! You mustn't do that!" Claire was terribly in earnest. "It wasn't the way you heard it at all. He's not a card shark! He wasn't playing crooked poker! Truly he wasn't!"

Swiftly she launched into an account of the scene between MacEwen and the Major, and when she had finished, the captain studied her shrewdly.

"And you believe this man, this Major Lesley?" he asked.

Wide-eyed, Claire said, "Well, of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, then you know him well?"

Color burned in Claire's cheeks, but she met his eyes straightly.

"I never set eyes on him until I came aboard in Jacksonville," she answered with spirit. "But in my profession, we do learn something about judging character. Everybody insists he's a wonderful judge of character; but—well, I just know the Major was telling the truth. He wanted to give MacEwen back his money, and the only way MacEwen would accept it was for the Major to admit he won it dishonestly."

The captain nodded thoughtfully, and there was a faint smile beneath his close-cropped gray mustache.

"That's pretty much the way Curt had it figured out," he

admitted. "Oh, of course he didn't know the reason behind the Major's calm acceptance of MacEwen's accusation. But he felt pretty sure that the Major just wanted to get out of any more card playing! Curt's a pretty smart fellow, and I was inclined to believe his summing up of the situation. But now you make it even more clear. I have another reason for being grateful to you, Miss Frazier."

"Well thanks for believing me," Claire said awkwardly.

The cabin boy served her dessert, a delectable apple pie with a thin slice of tangy cheese. To the captain he presented a small saucer which held two white tablets and a glass of milky-looking liquid.

"I'm under strict orders to drop twenty-five pounds on this trip," the captain explained, eying the pills and the liquid with a humorously resigned eye. "I'm trying very hard to hang on for another year or two until Curt gets his master's license and can take over for me."

"Oh, is he going to become captain of the Highland Queen?"

"We are both planning on it. He has a few more months to go before his master's license, and then he has been promised my job," the captain answered.

"And what will you do then?" asked Claire, genuinely interested.

"Oh, don't you know what every retired ship captain looks forward to, Miss Frazier? Retiring to the country and starting a chicken farm."

"You won't like it," Claire warned him.

"I don't suppose so." He grinned at her. "But a man can't keep going to sea all his life. I've just about done that. And it's time to stand aside and let a younger man take over. I know Curt will do a fine job. Don't you think so, Miss Frazier?"

"Oh, I'm sure he will," Claire answered almost too hastily. "He is very popular with the passengers."

"And with the shippers with whom we do business," the captain nodded. "My only fear is that he'll fall in love with some little flibbertigibbet who won't want to go to sea with him, as my Martha did. If that happens—"

"Well, frankly, Captain, it's not the sort of life that would appeal to every woman," Claire pointed out.

"I know." He nodded above his pipe. "Women like to put out roots, settle down, raise a family, give them security. That's natural enough, of course. But—well, I hope when Curt falls it will be for some woman with an adventurous spirit, who can make a home for him aboard ship as my Martha did for me."

Claire nodded soberly, caught in spite of herself by the tide of memories that were sweeping over him.

"If a woman is truly in love with a man, Captain, she wants to do what he wants, live the way he wants to live, because since he will be the breadwinner, it's her responsibility to go along—" She broke off and laughed at herself ruefully. "I don't quite know why I'm talking like this. How would I know what a woman truly in love would want?"

"You're a woman," the captain pointed out, smiling.

"Well, yes, but not an expert on love, by several million light years," she assured him, and stood up. "I've enjoyed this very much, Captain. Thank you for having me."

He rose too and walked with her to the door, smiling down at her.

"It's been my pleasure, Miss Frazier! Thank you for it."

He held the door for her. She smiled up at him and stepped out into the companionway as the door closed behind her.

She stood for a moment looking at the closed door, thinking of the big, grizzled, gentle man who had faced and accepted the loss of a beloved wife with such courage and fortitude. She thought of Rick, and the cowardly way she had run away from the hospital, unwilling to face the loving sympathy of her friends. At that moment, she wasn't liking herself very well!

She walked out on the deck, drenched with golden sunshine, and around to the deck chairs where she had been spending most of her afternoon hours. But even as she reached the corner behind which they sat, she heard the voices of Mrs. Burke and Mrs. Hennessy and turned away. She didn't want to get involved in their chatter, she told herself, and turned once more along the deck.

As she passed the companionway door, Curt stepped out into the sunshine, almost colliding with her, and stopped, drawing back, a smile on his face, his eyes eager.

"I understand you lunched with the captain." He smiled at her. "Great old boy, isn't he?"

Claire looked up at him.

"You two seem to have formed a mutual admiration society," she mocked. "He seems to think quite well of you, too."

As though somewhat surprised as well as obviously pleased by her lack of hostility, Curt said eagerly, "I hope so. I have a tremendous admiration for him."

"He told me about losing his wife," said Claire quietly. "She must have been a wonderful woman, to be willing to go to sea with him like that."

"I've only worked with him for the last twelve years, so I never met his wife," Curt answered, and for a moment they stood side by side, looking out over the sea as the ship plodded steadily on her way. "I imagine it would take a most unusual woman to be willing to sail with her husband like that."

"I imagine she would just have to be very much in love with him, don't you?" asked Claire slowly. And then realizing the intimacy of that, she added hurriedly, "I didn't know that ship's captains were allowed to take their wives aboard with them."

"It's a very old custom aboard freighters and tramp steamers," Curt told her thoughtfully. "I imagine it dates back to the days of the Yankee Clippers, when a captain might be gone from home for years at a time."

"I always had a mental picture of the wives of Clipper captains pacing the beach waiting for word their husbands' ships had been sighted," Claire admitted.

"If there were children to be schooled and brought up, perhaps the wives felt they were needed more at home," he agreed as though the subject had an unusual interest for him. "Life aboard ship can be very pleasant, even for a captain's wife; that is, of course, if she wants to make it so."

Suddenly he straightened and his eyes widened.

"Well, what do you know?" he marveled softly.

Puzzled, Claire looked a question at him, and suddenly he grinned, that small-boy grin that added to his charm.

"You and I are standing here talking, without verbal daggers flashing between us! Why, you are almost friendly! I can't believe it!" He frankly admitted his amazement, and Claire had the grace to blush.

"I have been a bit unpleasant, haven't I?" she agreed reluctantly.

"You have indeed," he assured her firmly.

She stared at him for a moment, scarlet and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she said miserably. "I—well, I *am* sorry—"

"Don't be," said Curt quietly, all hint of teasing raillery gone. "You've been deeply troubled and very unhappy."

Claire caught her breath and stared up at him.

"How could you possibly know that?" she stammered faintly.

"By just looking at you when you didn't think anyone was," he answered with a simplicity that she found somehow painful. "Whatever it was, I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

"You and Nora both have bothered me quite a bit," he said slowly, as they leaned on the railing, not looking at each other. "But of course Vera explained that Nora is going through the agonies of a frustrated love affair and is not really responsible. After all, she's only a kid."

"And I am twenty-four and a woman grown who is supposed to have more sense than to grieve about a frustrated love affair?" she cut in swiftly.

Curt straightened and eyed her.

"Oh, boy! Here we go again!" he said half under his breath. "I should have known that flag of truce business was just a come-on."

"That was what you meant, wasn't it?" Claire pursued him relentlessly.

"Well, no," said Curt grimly. "It hadn't occurred to me you could be sharing Nora's mental attitude, because I

couldn't imagine any man you could care about not being your slave, and you don't have a mother to drag you away from him. So why should I take it for granted that you were, like Nora, a fugitive from a love affair?"

Claire set her teeth and turned her eyes away from him. And when she looked back again, he was gone! He had simply turned and marched away.

She stood for a moment watching him as he strode down the deck, and then she turned back once more to contemplate the ocean, her mouth thinning a little. After all, what difference did it make to her whether he liked her or not? She didn't like him, or any other tall, devastatingly handsome man. She'd been in love with one such charmer, and for a girl with any sense at all, one such experience was surely more than enough!

Chapter Ten

The days slid by like blue and gold beads on a chain. As Major Lesley had warned her happily, the Highland Queen poked in and out of various Caribbean ports taking on or discharging cargo, and the passengers went ashore for a few hours at each port, returning in the evening to chatter across the dinner table about their experiences and their discoveries.

Major Lesley proved to be a fascinating guide, and Claire was happy to accompany him on these shore trips. He always seemed to know which was the most interesting sight; which the most famous historical point of interest. And once he was convinced that she did not consider his carefully acquired guide-book tours a bore, he expanded visibly in the sun of her approval and was obviously delighted and proud of her companionship.

Claire had visited her patient, the crewman, several

times, and he had been able to return to his duties. She was held in high esteem among all the ship's personnel and enjoyed many privileges not ordinarily accorded to any save the most VIP passengers, a fact Vera was not slow to notice.

"It's getting to be quite a 'thing' between you and the Major, isn't it?" she drawled one evening as they came back to the salon after dinner.

"I find him a very interesting and delightful man," said Claire coolly. "I like him very much."

"Oh, come now," mocked Vera derisively. "Unless he's secretly a millionaire, which I doubt, how could such a funny, weird little duck interest a beautiful girl like you?"

"By having a very fine mind and a great zest for life, and because he has planned this trip for so long and done so much reading about it that I hate to think how much of it I'd have missed without him as a guide," Claire answered quite honestly.

Vera considered that thoughtfully.

"Oh well, Curt has a fine mind, too, and he's made this trip so often I'm sure that there's not much he has missed," she said smugly.

"I'm sure of that, too," Claire told her, and went on her way, feeling Vera's mocking eyes upon her as she walked.

The affair between Curt and Vera had become so much a matter of course that it was now taken for granted that when there were shore parties, Vera would always wait for Curt and go ashore with him. As the youngest passengers aboard, MacEwen Russell and Nora seemed to have established a mild friendship, so that they were a frequent twosome ashore.

The Highland Queen had finished her business with the Caribbean ports and was plodding her way into the Gulf of Mexico when it happened.

Claire was about to leave her cabin for dinner when a terrific scream came from the cabin next door—Vera's voice, high, terrible in its intensity of shock and horror. Claire ran into the corridor as Vera's door burst open and

Vera stood there, white as the dress she wore, her eyes wide with horror, babbling unintelligibly.

Claire ran past her into the room and to the tiny bath where she stopped for a moment, shocked to rigidity by what she saw.

Nora leaned against the wall, her hands extended above the wash-basin and thick spurts of blood running down her slashed wrists. She was staring at the blood with eyes that were wide and sick with horror. Beside the basin lay a blood-stained razor blade.

Claire turned as people began running into the cabin and called out sharply, "Somebody get the first aid kit, *quick!*"

Curt loomed in the bathroom door, wide-eyed as Claire glanced up at him. She was beside the basin now, her thumbs pressing firmly against the veins in the girl's wrists that were emptying themselves into the basin. As Claire pressed her thumbs down, the flow became a thin trickle, and a moment later, Carl, the steward, thrust himself through the gathering crowd, drawn by Vera's persistent thin, high screams.

Claire looked up at Curt, still pressing her thumbs on the veins, and said sharply, "Make her be quiet! Slap her hard."

Curt looked startled as he glanced at Vera and then back at Claire.

"Slap her?" he repeated.

"Do you know a better cure for hysteria?" demanded Claire, and glanced at Carl. "Here, Carl, put your thumbs where mine are and press gently but firmly."

Curt said swiftly, "Here, let me."

His hands slid deftly beneath Claire's, so that she could remove hers without lessening the pressure on the girl's wrists, and Claire glanced over her shoulder at Vera who huddled against the wall still emitting those high, thin wails that seemed to pierce the eardrums.

Mrs. Burke was closer to her, and Claire called out, "Mrs. Burke, slap her hard! Make her stop that awful racket."

Mrs. Burke nodded and, with a glint of pure pleasure in her eyes, delivered a loud, hard slap against Vera's contorted face that sent Vera stumbling toward her bed, where she subsided, moaning and whimpering but no longer screaming.

Claire worked with swift, sure fingers, relieved immeasurably to see that the cuts, while they had bled freely, were superficial.

Nora was pasty-white, her eyes riveted to the wounded wrists, and when at last Claire had finished the dressing on them, Nora looked up at Claire and whispered piteously, "I didn't mean to do it—"

"Why did you, Nora?" demanded Claire sharply. "You're a little fool, Nora. Don't you know there isn't a man in the world worth it?"

"I thought I could be brave," Nora stammered faintly. "But it didn't hurt—and then I saw the blood—"

"And lucky for you that you did, Nora," said Claire, and her voice was stern. "You silly child!"

"Now wait a minute," protested Curt, as though he found Claire's harshness unbearable. "The poor kid's had a terrible shock."

"She should have a terrible spanking," snapped Claire. "Any girl who is fool enough to think any man is worth the paring of her fingernail deserves to be hurt!"

"Oh, my poor baby! My poor, poor baby!" wailed Vera.

"Shall I slap her again, Claire?" asked Mrs. Burke pleasantly.

"No, of course not," answered Claire, and smiled at Nora and said gently, "You're going to be all right, honey. But don't you ever do anything so foolish again! Do you hear me?"

Tears were slipping down Nora's white face, and she made a terrific effort to smile.

"I won't, Claire—oh, I won't. I don't know why I ever thought I'd be brave enough to try it," she said faintly.

"Honey, it doesn't take bravery to destroy yourself," Claire told her. "It takes bravery to go on living, even when you'd

just as soon not. I know it hurts when you're in love with someone and have to give him up, but this isn't the way out of a heartache like that, Nora, and don't you ever think it."

"I won't, Claire. What's being in love got to do with it, anyway?" Nora asked like a bewildered child.

"Well, we won't go into that now," Claire smiled at her comfortingly. "Now we'll get you into bed with a sedative, and tomorrow morning everything will be quite all right."

Nora looked down at her bandaged wrists, and there was a curious expression in her eyes when she raised them to Claire's.

"Will there be a scar, Claire?" she asked.

Puzzled, Claire repeated, "A scar? Oh, I don't think so, honey. A very tiny one, maybe, but you can always wear a bracelet or a wristwatch to hide it."

To her utter amazement, Nora tilted back her head and gave a small, ugly bark of bitter laughter.

"Oh, yes, a bracelet," she mocked unsteadily. "By all means a bracelet, perhaps a pair of them—" And suddenly she was weeping stormily again and Claire was holding her close, looking up at Curt, frowning in her bewilderment.

"She's overwrought, and why not?" Curt answered the bewildered look. "Here, everybody clear out, and let Claire get her to bed and quiet her down. Is what you'll need in the first aid kit, Claire? Can I get you anything else from the ship's pharmacy?"

Claire cast a swift, expert eye over the contents of the kit and shook her head, as she picked up a small vial of white tablets.

"Two of these should be all she needs to give her a good night's sleep," she said quickly. "And I'll give Vera a couple, too. They both need a good relaxing night's sleep after this."

The other passengers filed out, herded by Curt and Carl, and when Claire had gotten Nora into bed and given her the sleeping tablets, she turned to Vera who was sitting, wide-eyed and dazed, on the other narrow bed, staring at Nora as though she had never seen the girl before.

"Why, baby?" she whispered in a tone of the most abject grief. "Why did you want to do that?"

Nora gave her a long, level-eyed look and then turned her face away.

"You can ask me that, Mother?" Her voice was a small, bitter cry.

"But, baby, I told you—" Vera began, her voice shaking.

"I know you did, Mother, but you see, I didn't believe you. Why should I? How could I?" Nora's voice was thin and weary.

"But, baby—" Vera whimpered. "I've never lied to you, have I?"

"Oh, haven't you?"

Claire said swiftly, with a note of authority that had stood her in good stead throughout her profession, "I must ask you, Vera, not to question her now. Let her get to sleep. Tomorrow you can talk to her. Meanwhile, take these two tablets and get some sleep yourself."

Vera looked up at her, and her white, tormented face made her look many years older as she docilely accepted the two tablets.

"I'll never forget seeing her there like that—" she shuddered and accepted the glass of water Claire held for her, spilling a little of it as Vera's teeth chattered against it. "Why, Claire? Why did she do it?"

"That's something she alone knows, Vera, and we'll have to wait until she is able to tell us," Claire said soothingly, noting with some compunction the mark on Vera's jaw where Mrs. Burke had slapped her. "I'm sorry I had to ask Mrs. Burke to slap you, Vera, but you were hysterical, and your screaming made it worse for Nora."

Vera put up a hand and touched the mark and seemed surprised.

"Oh, that." She dismissed it as of no consequence whatever. "I'm glad it wasn't Curt, anyway."

"Oh, he wouldn't have done it," Claire smiled at her. "I'm afraid he's the kind that never lifts a hand against a woman in self-defense!"

Vera allowed Claire to get her ready for bed, as docile as a child, scarcely seeming to be aware of what was being done. And when, at last, they were both drifting into sleep and she felt it was safe to leave them, Claire put out the light and slipped across to the door.

As she stepped from the cabin and drew the door shut behind her, she turned to face a man who was lounging against the opposite wall, obviously waiting for her.

She paused, startled, quite certain it was Curt, and then she recognized MacEwen Russell.

"How is she now?" he asked anxiously, his voice lowered to a sick-room tone.

"Nora? Oh, she's going to be quite all right," Claire answered. "The gashes were merely surface wounds, little more than that. I suppose if her mother hadn't discovered her in time, they could have been serious. So let's be grateful Vera found her."

MacEwen walked along the corridor with Claire toward the dining salon, his brow furrowed in a deep scowl.

"I suppose Nora didn't give any reason—" he began hesitantly.

"None at all, because she was in a state of shock when I got to her," Claire assured him firmly, and looked up at him curiously. "You and Nora have become good friends, haven't you?"

"I'm sorry for her," said MacEwen, and there was a trace of belligerence in his voice. "That hell-hound of a mother rides her from morning till night. Did you know her mother beats her?"

Claire paused, wide-eyed.

"Oh, come now," she protested vigorously, but there was more than a faint memory of her first night aboard ship, and the one when she had heard Nora weeping and had seen the ugly marks of a violent hand on her face.

"It's true," MacEwen insisted stubbornly. "It's happened several times. I've seen Nora with a mark on her face and bruises on her arms so purple that she couldn't wear a sleeveless dress. Somebody ought to kick that mother of hers

overboard, somewhere where the sharks are good and hungry. They'd have to be hungry to bother with that hellhound."

"Look, I'm afraid you're being too melodramatic about all this—"

"You think a fine, sweet girl like Nora would try to kill herself just for an idle whim?" snapped MacEwen sharply.

"I don't know why she would do such a thing, and I know her mother is devoted to her—" Claire began, but MacEwen's disgusted snort silenced her.

Before either of them could find words, Curt came striding down the corridor, eying MacEwen without favor and saying briskly to Claire, "Captain would like you to have dinner in his quarters, Claire. Dinner is over in the salon, and Captain wants to thank you personally."

Relieved to be free of MacEwen's troubling questions and thoughts, Claire smiled warmly at Curt and said, "That's very kind, but I'll have to change my dress."

She glanced down with distaste at the stains that speckled it and turned back to her own room. She heard Curt and MacEwen talking in low voices as they waited. Swiftly she got out of her dress, into a brief shower and, freshly clothed, came out to meet them.

Whatever they had been discussing, MacEwen's face was a dark storm cloud as he strode away, and Curt looked down at Claire with a wry smile.

"That young man seems to have quite a bee in his bonnet," he admitted.

"I know. He was telling me," Claire said as they walked toward the captain's quarters.

"You don't believe that bilge he was saying, do you?" demanded Curt sharply.

Claire asked quietly, "Do you mean about Vera abusing Nora?"

"It's the most arrant nonsense. Why, Vera couldn't possibly mistreat the girl. She's crazy about her, devoted to her!"

"So much so that she dragged the girl away from the man

she loved and wanted to marry?" asked Claire quietly.

Curt hesitated, scowling.

"Well, she said the man was no good," he pointed out, and added in a firmer tone, "And you yourself told Nora that no man on earth was worth a girl's destroying herself for."

"I know I did," Claire agreed with him firmly.

For a moment, outside the captain's door, his hand on the knob, Curt looked down at her, scowling.

"You don't look like a man-hater, but you sure sound like one," he accused her. And without giving her a chance to answer, he opened the door and ushered her into the captain's quarters.

Chapter Eleven

Captain Rodolfson welcomed her with gallantry and admiration, and when Claire had been seated at the small table where the wizened, monkey-like cabin boy was serving a delicious meal for her, she smiled up at him.

"Really, Captain, all this isn't a bit necessary," she assured him.

"I feel it is, Miss Frazier," the captain answered, and gestured to Curt. "Sit down, Curt. I want you in on this."

Claire looked from one to the other above her dinner.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she began uneasily.

"Miss Frazier, there is something going on aboard this ship that I don't understand and I don't like," the captain told her firmly. "Curt agrees with me. He doesn't understand it any more than I do, and we very much hope you can help us."

Claire looked from one brown, intent face to the other, deeply puzzled, vaguely uneasy.

"Why, Captain, I'm not quite sure I know what you're talking about," she said warily.

Captain Rodolfson's big face was touched with a friendly smile.

"We aren't asking you to spy on the other passengers, Miss Frazier, if that's what you are afraid of." He dismissed the thing that was making her uncomfortable and uneasy. "We have no right to do that. But you are a nurse, taking care of our crewman, and now of this passenger. Miss Frazier, have you any idea what could have caused this girl, little more than a child, to want to destroy herself?"

"Frankly, Captain, I can't believe that she really meant to do any such thing," Claire told him earnestly. "I think she made the pretense in a fit of temper, to frighten her mother, perhaps. The cuts were scarcely more than surface cuts. I admit the bleeding could have been quite serious if Vera hadn't happened to discover her in time. But I think Nora was counting on her mother doing just that."

The captain and Curt exchanged significant glances, and then, as though Captain Rodolfson had reached a sudden decision, he leaned toward Claire, smiling.

"Please go on with your dinner, Miss Frazier. Curt and I will join you in a cup of coffee, though we've both had dinner in the salon, while we tried to calm down the other passengers," he began. And when the monkey-like little man had served them coffee, he went on gravely, "I believe you have been seeing quite a bit of Major Lesley?"

Claire blinked in surprise, jolted by this sudden shift in his questioning.

"Why, yes, Major Lesley is a friend of mine, and I like him very much," she answered with spirit. "You surely aren't going to try to involve him in this escapade of Nora's?"

"That's what puzzles me, Miss Frazier," the captain said quietly. "Whether or not he could be involved."

"Well, I think—I hope!—I can set your mind at rest on that subject," Claire answered vigorously. "Major Lesley barely knows the girl. Very few of the passengers have more than a nodding acquaintance with her. She's been sulking ever since

I came aboard; the only passenger who seems to have made any impression at all on her is MacEwen Russell."

Once more significant glances passed between Curt and the captain and once more it was the captain who spoke.

"Oh, yes, they've made a few shore trips together, I believe," he said smoothly.

"Well, that seems logical enough, don't you think, considering that they are the only two young people aboard?" Claire pointed out.

"Oh, yes, of course." The captain accepted and dismissed that in a single phrase; obviously his interest was not deeply taken. "Curt tells me that Mrs. Barclay seems to be afraid of this Major Lesley."

"Afraid of him? I'd hardly call it that." Claire hesitated, frowning thoughtfully. "She seems a bit—well, bothered is the word I would have used, because she has the feeling she has met him before and can't remember where. Women are sometimes like that, Captain. For no reason at all, if they see someone who looks vaguely familiar, they fret themselves trying to remember where and under what circumstances."

"Under what circumstances," the captain murmured thoughtfully.

"I don't think that really means anything, Captain," Claire assured him, smiling. "Women are funny people, you know—"

Both the captain and Curt grinned at that.

"I'm afraid we *don't* know, Miss Frazier, which is the reason we are badgering you like this." It was the captain who spoke, his tone friendly, a twinkle in his eyes. "You don't think, then, that Mrs. Barclay is afraid of the Major?"

"I don't see how she, or anyone else for that matter, could be."

"He *is* a self-confessed card-sharp, you remember," Curt reminded her, and she turned on him swiftly.

"That's not true," she flashed. "Oh, I mean he confessed, but he was really lying because he wanted so much to return MacEwen's money that he had won the night before, and it was the only way MacEwen would accept it."

The captain nodded thoughtfully.

"That brings us to MacEwen," he said after a moment. "Odd sort of fellow. Curt tells me that MacEwen has complained to him that Mrs. Barclay abuses her daughter."

Curt spoke before Claire could get her thoughts in order.

"Which, of course, is the most outrageous nonsense," he said swiftly. "Vera Barclay is devoted to the girl; too much so, maybe. She seems determined to keep Nora as much of a baby as she can, for fear, I suppose, that if she grows up as she should, she'll marry and be lost to her mother."

Claire studied him curiously, wondering if he really believed that, and Curt looked back at her steadily, as though daring her to deny it.

She lifted her shoulders in a tiny gesture that just barely missed being a shrug.

"I'm afraid I couldn't be very helpful on that phase of the situation," she drawled. "After all, Curt knows Vera much better than anyone else on board, I'm sure."

Curt merely grinned, obviously completely undisturbed by the gentle taunt.

"She's a very interesting woman," he said politely.

"And beautiful." Claire could not keep back the words.

"Oh, yes, that, too," Curt agreed, and she thought there was a twinkle in his eyes as they studied her.

"Well, it's a most disturbing business," said the captain heavily. "I can't remember when we've carried a passenger list like it, can you, Curt?"

"Well, we've never had a card sharp aboard—sorry, Claire, he said he was—or an attempted suicide," Curt agreed cautiously.

Claire smiled at the captain.

"Makes you wish that your ship had never been required to carry passengers as well as cargo, doesn't it, Captain?" Her voice commiserated with his frame of mind.

He smiled warmly at her. "Oh, no, Miss Frazier. If we'd never carried passengers, we wouldn't have had the pleasure of your company aboard," he reminded her. And the slight flamboyance, the faintly old-fashioned gallantry were tem-

pered by his obvious sincerity. "I—ah—I've been wondering about something else, Miss Frazier."

Claire tensed slightly and said only, "Yes, Captain?"

"I believe that you are, at the moment, unemployed?"

"I'm on vacation, Captain," she corrected him firmly.

"You plan to return to your work at the hospital when your vacation ends?" he pursued.

"Why, I really haven't any plans, Captain." She was puzzled but not offended at his persistence. "I want to have a visit with my parents in Honolulu, and I may decide to stay there. I resigned at the hospital, but if I should ever want to go back, they'll accept me."

"With great good pleasure and benefit to the hospital I'm sure," the captain assured her. "I was wondering if we could dare offer you a job with our line?"

Claire's eyes widened as she looked from one to the other.

"You mean aboard the Highland Queen?" she asked, bewildered.

The captain nodded, smiling at her bewilderment.

"You see, as things stand now, we may only carry twelve passengers because we don't carry either a doctor or an RN," he explained. "But there is space that could carry a larger number, if we had an RN aboard. And if we could persuade you to be that RN, we would all be very happy."

"Very happy indeed," Curt echoed politely, but there was a warmth in his voice that lent an unexpected emphasis to his words.

Claire looked from one to the other and laughed helplessly.

"You really are two of the most amazing men I've ever met," she admitted. "I don't know what to say—"

"You don't like the sea? Shipboard?" asked the captain anxiously.

"Of course I do. I've enjoyed every minute," Claire soothed his anxiety. "It's just that I'm not sure I would like it indefinitely. I mean, after all, I'm a landlubber. You'll have to give me time to think about it."

"It's a good life," Curt assured her, and there was more than a trace of eagerness in his voice. "I honestly believe you

would like it. There's enough variety about our ports of call to keep you from getting bored; we rarely know exactly where we are going when we set out or how soon we'll get there. Some of our passengers have called us 'The Good Ship, What's Your Hurry?' They seem to feel it's a welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of life ashore."

"I can see how it would be," Claire answered, remembering the days of her training and then her service on Emergency and in other wards of the hospital where everybody but the patient, usually supine and helpless, seemed to be rushing about like mad.

She looked from one face to the other, saw the eagerness in their eyes, and added swiftly, "For a vacation, I mean. I'm not a bit sure how it would be for a steady diet."

"We'd try very hard to keep you from being bored," Curt assured her so eagerly that the captain shot him a swift, rather startled glance. "Promise you will at least consider it, won't you, Claire?"

"Of course," the captain cleared his throat as though bringing them back to a realization of his presence, "you understand, Miss Frazier, I'd have to get authorization from the home office of the shipping line, and we might not be able to offer you a very fancy salary—"

Claire stood up, smiling.

"I'll think about it, Captain," she promised him. "But I must warn you I won't be able to make up my mind until I've had my visit with my parents."

"Of course, of course, my dear Miss Frazier," answered the captain heartily. "Just bear us in mind, and we'll give you an address at which you can cable us. Meanwhile, my most hearty thanks for all you've done."

"I was glad to be of service, Captain, and thank you for everything." Claire put her hand in his and turned toward the door. "Good night, and thank you both."

Curt held the door for her and walked with her down the corridor to her own door. She paused at the door of the Barclay cabin and touched the knob. But the door was locked, as she had been certain it would be. Either Vera or Nora—

and it was most likely to have been Vera—had fought off the effects of the sedative sufficiently to lock the door and slip the chain in place.

Claire leaned her ear close against the panel and heard a faint, lady-like but quite unmistakable snore. She smothered a smile, remembering how many times her most refined, most dignified feminine patients had emitted that same sound beneath the effects of a sedative.

Curt frowned at the locked door and offered a master key, but Claire shook her head, moving on to her own door before she answered, her voice quite low.

"They are both asleep and will be for at least eight hours," she told him softly. "I'll check with Vera in the morning, before breakfast. But I feel sure Nora is going to be fine."

"You're quite a girl," said Curt quietly. And beneath the look in his eyes, Claire felt color rise in her cheeks. "I hope very much you will sail again with the Highland Queen as a member of the ship's personnel. A very important member, by the way!"

"Well, thank you."

She stepped through the door into her cabin, smiled at him and closed the door in his handsome face.

She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared straight ahead of her. It had been quite an evening, and she was trying to sort out her somewhat chaotic thoughts. She was much disturbed because the sorting was badly upset by memories of Curt's handsome face, his deep, vibrant voice and his quite undeniable charm.

Chapter Twelve

Because it had been so late before she managed to get to sleep, Claire awoke late. And as she came from her

stateroom, Vera was just emerging from her own, moving carefully glancing back over her shoulder as she drew the door shut behind her.

She was pale and drawn this morning, and not even the most careful make-up could conceal the fact. She greeted Claire with a nervous start and managed a smile that was unconvincing.

"Oh, hello," she said softly. "My poor baby is still sleeping."

"That's good for her," Claire said quietly. "I won't disturb her then. I'll come back later."

Vera laid a hand on her arm and slowed her as they walked toward the salon.

"I can't ever thank you, Claire, for saving her," she managed huskily. "If I lost her—I wouldn't want to live. I'd have nothing to live for. Everything I've ever done has been for her, to give her good things, nice clothes, good schools, the best of everything."

Claire was touched by the aching sincerity in Vera's voice. The next moment Vera said harshly, "Why did she do it, Claire? I'd told her everything was going to be all right—why couldn't she believe me?"

"I don't know," Claire said gently. "But you mustn't worry about her. She's going to be quite all right—"

"I just can't understand why she would want to frighten me so," Vera went on desperately. "Because, of course, she didn't really mean to kill herself. She only pretended because she hates me!"

"Now, look, you mustn't let yourself get overwrought and hysterical again," Claire said firmly.

Vera drew a hard breath, and her chin steadied and went up a little.

"Oh, yes, that's one against you in my book—having that Burke creature slap me! How she dared! And she looked as if she enjoyed it. That's the unforgivable thing about it—that you ordered it and she enjoyed it! Curt, bless him, wouldn't do it—" Vera's voice gained strength from rising anger at the memories she was evoking.

"It's the traditional cure for hysteria, Vera," Claire defended herself.

"Oh, I suppose so," Vera answered curtly, and caught her breath and went rigid as she and Claire stepped into the salon and came face to face with Major Lesley.

He greeted them with his old-fashioned courtesy and seemed to find nothing unexpected in Vera's rigidity or the sheer hatred that her eyes revealed as she met his.

"I do hope the little girl is doing well this morning?" Major Lesley asked her politely.

"I'm sure you're very concerned about her." Vera's tone was an insolent slap in his face, and Major Lesley blinked and stepped back as she swept past him and on to the table where a few of the passengers were lingering over coffee and cigarettes.

Major Lesley watched her, and then he looked down at Claire and smiled.

"When you've had your breakfast, Claire, shall we have our regular constitutional around the deck? It's a marvelous morning." His tone was quite placid, and Claire studied him curiously.

"Why, yes, Major, I'd like that," she answered, and he gave her his funny little bow and stepped out to the companionway and the deck.

Carl, the steward, smiled a warm greeting at Claire as he served her iced papaya juice, fresh crisp toast and bacon and eggs. The coffee was piping hot and delectable, and as the fragrance of the food rose, Claire realized how hungry she was.

Claire was in her usual seat, but Curt's was empty. Obviously he had finished breakfast and departed to his duties. But the passengers lingered, eying Vera curiously, and Mrs. Burke murmured something to her friend Mrs. Hennessy. The two ladies smothered a laugh and left the table.

Angry color burned high beneath Vera's make-up and her eyes flamed with anger as she watched them leave the salon, arm in arm, their ample bodies swaying a little to the gentle movement of the ship.

Claire was startled at the savage twist of Vera's mouth and the blaze in her eyes. But she said nothing and went on with her breakfast. Vera ignored the food Carl placed before her and sat smoking, her eyes on space, her brows drawn together in a sullen frown.

Claire was just finishing her coffee when MacEwen came quickly into the salon, saw her, saw Vera, and hesitated, his jaw hardening. Then he came to Claire and, elaborately ignoring Vera, asked anxiously about Nora's condition. Before Claire could reassure him, Vera turned her blazing eyes upon him.

"I really can't see, Mr. Russell, why my daughter's condition should concern you," said Vera nastily.

MacEwen looked at her with eyes as cold and contemptuous as her tone.

"Can't you, Mrs. Barclay? I happen to like Nora," he said distinctly. "And what's more, I happen to be sorry for her."

Vera's eyes widened slightly.

"Sorry for her?" she repeated as though she could not believe she had really heard him say that. "And may I ask why you should be sorry for her?"

"Well, since you've asked, chiefly because you are her mother," said MacEwen furiously.

Vera caught her breath in rage.

"Why, you impossible creature! How dare you say that?" she gasped.

MacEwen met her eyes straightly.

"Because of the way you treat her, of course," he said so distinctly that the few passengers lingering at the other end of the table heard and turned curious eyes on them. "If you treated a dog the way you treat her, Mrs. Barclay, the Humane Society would clap you in jail."

Vera stared at him as though she could not believe her ears, and then, moving so swiftly that no one could guess her intention in time to try to stop her, she rose, picked up her coffee cup and hurled its contents straight into his face.

For an instant, as though startled at what she had done, Vera stared at the empty coffee cup and at its contents

streaming down MacEwen's face. Then she glanced about the table, turned swiftly and went at a stumbling run out of the salon.

Carl was busy with a napkin, mopping MacEwen's face, and MacEwen's grin was tight-lipped and without mirth.

"One thing we may say for freighter cruises, folks," MacEwen addressed the other guests with an attempt at levity, "is that they are never dull. Not when there's somebody like Mrs. Barclay aboard, anyway."

He pushed Carl away, nodded and strode out of the salon.

"Now what the devil do you suppose that was all about?" Claire heard one of the other passengers ask his table companion.

"One thing I learned a long time ago is never to try to understand a woman," his companion answered him. "Shall we get some fresh air?"

"By all means; I could use some after that little display," the first speaker answered. And the two men rose, nodded smiling at Claire and took themselves off.

Claire declined Carl's offer of more coffee and followed the men out on deck

Major Lesley was leaning against the railing, waiting for her and came eagerly to meet her.

The day was all that he had promised, and Claire smiled at him as she tucked her hand through his arm and they set out for their morning walk.

It was obvious that the little man's mood was not as bright and gay as the morning, but they had made one complete turn about the deck before he put his thoughts into words.

"Miss Frazier, I'm truly, deeply sorry about that poor child," he said unhappily.

Claire looked down at his unhappy eyes.

"She's going to be quite all right, Major," she told him, puzzled by his obvious concern.

"But she must have been in a terrific mental disturbance to have attempted such a thing," said the Major worriedly. "And I'm afraid I may have been responsible."

"How could you have been, Major? You scarcely know the girl."

He raised his eyes to meet hers and then looked away as he paused beside the railing and Claire stood waiting.

"But I've remembered where I first saw the mother and under what circumstances," he confessed humbly, as though he admitted some crime.

"And you think that may have caused Nora to do what she did?"

Claire's tone was touched with sympathy, though she could have only the vaguest possible idea what was troubling him.

Major Lesley nodded miserably. "Mrs. Barclay doesn't remember me, but she's frightened. And I wish she wouldn't be. I very much wish she would realize that I have no intention of making any trouble for her."

He looked up again at Claire, and his mouth was framed in a twisted attempt at a smile.

"I would like an opportunity to tell Mrs. Barclay that, but she avoids me," Major Lesley explained painfully. "I've made several attempts to talk to her privately, but she always manages to slip away. It disturbs me very much that her fear of me may have caused the child to do what she did. And truly, Miss Frazier, Mrs. Barclay has nothing to fear from me. Nothing at all! I've retired!"

Claire was uneasy before his very real worry.

"I suppose all this sounds very mysterious to you, Miss Frazier, and I'd explain if I could, but I honestly feel it would be better for me to keep the unpleasant secret to myself," he offered her a tacit apology.

"I'd much rather you did, Major," Claire told him frankly. "A secret shared ceases to be a secret. It's too bad you can't manage to tell Mrs. Barclay that her secret is safe with you—"

"I don't suppose for a moment she would believe me if I did," he sighed.

Claire felt sorry for him and laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Now look, Major," she made her tone gay and rallying, "this is the trip you've planned for and saved for and

studied for all these years. I just won't have it spoiled for you by such worries. Whatever Mrs. Barclay's secret may be, since you have no intention of revealing it to anyone, you mustn't let it spoil your trip."

"But if that poor child is so afraid of me that she does a horrible thing—"

"Nora's suffering from a frustrated love affair, Major," Claire soothed him, smiling. "And when you're nineteen or so, being torn from the arms of the man you're quite sure you love is about the greatest tragedy that can happen. Sometimes, even when you are older, it can hurt terribly."

Major Lesley looked as if he wanted very much to believe her, and Claire smiled at him.

"You really think it could have been that? Instead of her mother's fear of me?" he asked hopefully, pathetically anxious to believe it.

"I'm quite sure of it, Major," Claire told him with more conviction in her voice than in her heart. "And now shall we finish our walk? I want to hear more about the places we are going to see."

Major Lesley settled his incongruously sporty cap a little more firmly against the ocean wind and once more offered his arm, as they set out along the deck again.

Before they had completed the second round, he was chatting brightly and seemed to have left his worried thoughts behind, to Claire's intense relief.

Chapter Thirteen

Shortly before lunch she went below decks to freshen up and stopped at the door of the Barclay cabin. She rapped lightly and heard Nora's voice and opened the door.

Nora was still in bed, her bandaged wrists lying on the

cover, her miserably unhappy eyes on the porthole through which a glimpse of sun-drenched blue sky was visible.

She turned her head as Claire came in. Color poured into her young face, and her eyes were dark with shame.

"I wonder you'd even be willing to speak to me, Claire," she mumbled like an abashed child.

"Well, now that's a nice thing to say to your nurse." Claire made her voice gay and mocking, as she expertly examined the bandaged wrists and saw, as she had expected, that the cuts were healing nicely. "There's no reason, when I've put fresh dressings on, why you shouldn't get up for lunch."

"Oh, no! I couldn't!" Nora shuddered and her eyes closed tightly. "I can't ever face those other passengers again—I'd die of embarrassment."

Adjusting the dressings, Claire said lightly, though her eyes were worried, "Then I'm afraid you're going to get awfully hungry. I don't think they serve meals in bed to passengers on the Highland Queen! There's only one steward, Carl, and the captain's cabin boy, who, by the way, is someone you really should see. Cabin *boy!* Why, I'll bet he's sixty if he's a day, and he looks like a little gnome."

Nora brushed the attempted levity aside with a question that came straight from her heart, "Have you seen Mac this morning?"

"Mac? Oh, you mean MacEwen Russell." Claire nodded. "He was asking about you at breakfast. He seemed quite worried. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, scaring us all?"

Nora winced and tried to crawl further beneath the thin covers.

"Oh, yes, I'm ashamed—so terribly ashamed—I wish I could die!" she stammered. "That's how ashamed I am!"

"Well, don't let it go that far." Claire was still trying to rally her from her desperate mood. "After all, nothing can be quite that bad."

Nora's smile seemed to crawl across her white, convulsed face like an evil shadow.

"Let's forget about last night, shall we?" Claire said briskly,

smiling at her. "It's a perfectly gorgeous day and you should be out on deck, basking in the sunshine. And I'm sure MacEwen will be waiting for you."

That lit a spark in Nora's eyes, and Claire laughed a little as she went on to her own quarters to freshen up for lunch. Knowing that MacEwen would be waiting for her was the best medicine that Nora could have at the moment. But Claire could not rid herself of the uneasy memory of Vera's vicious attack on MacEwen that morning. Would she make another scene in the salon when Nora came in?

She tried to reassure herself on that point, but came into the salon as the bell rang, glancing swiftly about and relieved to see that, while MacEwen was in his accustomed place, neither Nora nor Vera was there.

Curt greeted Claire with every evidence of pleasure as she took her place, and as usual Carl gave her his warmest smile as he served her.

"How's the patient this morning?" Curt asked her, keeping his tone lowered so it would not reach beyond her.

Claire smiled at him as she unfolded her napkin.

"She'll be in to lunch soon," she told him. "She's fine."

"That's good news," said Curt with relief.

MacEwen leaned closer to Claire and asked anxiously, "She really is going to be all right?"

"Of course she is," Claire comforted him.

He scowled at his plate and seemed to take no further interest in what was going on around him, and lunch was almost over before Nora appeared in the doorway, looking fresh and neat in her thin printed cotton frock.

All eyes turned upon her, and she hesitated. For a moment it appeared as though her courage would fail her. Then she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin defiantly and walked to her chair. She looked the length of the table, up one side and down the other, meeting the curious, interested eyes that were upon her. Her color rose, and she tucked her bandaged wrists behind her.

"I'm terribly ashamed I made such a fool of myself last

night," she told them all, steadying her voice with an effort. "And I want to apologize to everybody."

And as though she could no longer endure the eyes turned upon her, she swept about and was gone.

MacEwen was on his feet, running after her, calling to her, and the next moment they were both gone.

A little murmur ran along the table like wind through dry leaves, and Claire said quietly, "I do hope we can all forget what has happened. She's frighteningly young and terribly embarrassed and—well, I'm sure all of us can remember times when we were that young and life seemed too complicated for endurance. Let's all be very kind to her and pretend it never happened, can't we?"

She looked up over her shoulder at Carl, who was serving her more coffee.

"Carl, she told me earlier that she was hungry," she confided in him. "Do you suppose you could find her something to eat and let me take it to her?"

"Well, of course, miss. I'll take it to her cabin," Carl offered eagerly.

"You'd better let me, Carl. She's feeling as if she'd like to crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after her. So we'd better let her alone as much as we can. She's become accustomed to me," Claire told him.

"Well, yes, miss. You're right, I'm sure," Carl agreed. "I'll see to it right away, miss."

When he had gone, Claire turned to Curt apologetically.

"I'm told service aboard ships like the Queen doesn't run to room service of meals. I hope I'm not upsetting the established routine."

Curt chuckled, his eyes warm upon her.

"After what you've done, Claire, my dear, the Queen is yours to command, and everybody aboard her—including the Captain and me, as well."

"Careful, friend!" Claire mocked him lightly. "Somebody will take you seriously one of these days."

"It is my fondest wish that you will," Curt told her quite simply, and for a startled moment, Claire's eyes widened

beneath the impact of what she saw in his. "I mean that, Claire, with all my heart."

Color burned high in Claire's face and she glanced uneasily along the table and saw the others had gone. And Curt, reading the swift, uneasy glance, said quietly, "Don't be frightened, Claire."

She turned her head swiftly and managed to meet his eyes and hated herself because her face was still hot.

Her hands shook a little despite her efforts to hold the tray steady. Halfway down the corridor, Major Lesley, loitering, obviously waiting for her, came to meet her.

"Is that for the little girl?" He indicated the tray and, at her nod, smiled. "She's not in her cabin. She's on deck, with that young MacEwen Russell."

Claire laughed. "Then maybe I shouldn't bother trying to feed her, though she told me she was getting hungry quite a while ago."

"I'll show you where she is," Major Lesley offered, and reached for the tray. "May I?"

"Thanks, but I'd better carry it, don't you think? I've had a great deal of experience carrying trays!"

He guided her along the deck and to the spot where she had had her own deck chair set up and where she and Nora had talked before. As she rounded the corner, she stopped short and looked down.

Nora sat in Claire's deck chair, MacEwen in the one beside her. He was holding both her hands very gently, and their voices were low-pitched and intimate.

Claire stood for a moment, hesitant, unnoticed; and then briskly she made her presence known and deposited the tray firmly on Nora's lap and said as firmly, "You have to keep your strength up, you know."

MacEwen scrambled to his feet, obviously annoyed at the interruption. But Nora, steadying the tray across her knees, looked up at Claire, beaming eagerly above a small tissue-wrapped package that had been held between her two palms, as MacEwen held her hands together.

"Oh, Claire, look at the lovely thing Mac gave me." She

glowed, unwrapped the tissue and revealed a necklace and a matching bracelet made of the tiniest possible sea shells, no larger than grains of wheat, intricately woven into tiny, colored flowers. "Aren't they lovely?"

Claire lifted the package and examined the necklace, and echoed Nora's delighted praise.

"Where in the world, Mac, did you find anything so exquisite?" Claire asked. "It's beautiful."

MacEwen looked pleased and happy.

"Oh, it's nothing much," he said cheerfully. "I picked it up in a little shop in Port-au-Prince. The natives make them, I understand. It looked like flowers and—well, I liked it. So when I wanted to give Nora some flowers, such as you always send somebody you like when they've been sick, I thought of this."

He looked down at Nora, who was ignoring the tray across her lap and crooning like a happy child over the gift.

"Well, for Pete's sake," he pretended to scold her, "it's not the Russian crown jewels, nor yet the Hope diamond. It's just a silly little trinket I picked up and thought you might like to have."

"Oh, I'd much rather have it than either of those, Mac! It's so different from anything I've ever had. Fasten it around my neck, will you, Mac?" She bowed her head and held the necklace in place while his fingers fastened the small catch.

Chapter Fourteen

A day or two later at dinner, Captain Rodolfson smiled about the table and said cheerfully, "I have good news for all of you. We've been ordered to put in at Honduras to pick up some cargo. You will have several hours ashore, and I'm

sure you will enjoy it. Belize is a city little known to tourists, and yet it is a fascinating place."

Major Lesley beamed in happy eagerness.

"Oh, yes, Captain, I've read about it. We are very lucky to get a chance to go ashore there," he said, and turned to the others with what Claire recognized, with affectionate amusement, as his "walking guide-book" expression. Belize was founded in 1578 as a mining settlement, and then in 1880 became the capital of Honduras. I'm sure it must be a fascinating place. It's a banana republic, isn't it, Captain?"

"It's a British possession," Captain Rodolfson agreed. "And it has a one-crop economy, which is bananas. They call them the 'yellow gold of Honduras.' "

For some reason she could never afterwards understand, Claire found herself looking at Vera, whose expression was that of one who had had a terrific shock. For a moment she sat quite still, her face white beneath her careful make-up, her eyes on her plate. Beneath the edge of the table her hands were gripped tightly together, and Claire could see the rigidity of her shoulders as her hands clenched.

Nora, beside her mother, looked almost as shocked, and after a moment Nora touched her tongue to suddenly dry lips and faced the captain.

"Do we have to stop there, Captain?" she asked huskily.

Captain Rodolfson looked at her swiftly, smiling faintly.

"I'm afraid we do, Miss Barclay," he answered politely. "Why? Are you getting bored with our leisurely pace?"

"Oh no, it's not that," Nora stammered, and glanced across the table at MacEwen who was watching her curiously. "It's just that—well, if we keep putting in at every small port along the coast, we just won't ever get anywhere, will we?"

Captain Rodolfson smiled at her.

"That's freighter travel, Miss Barclay," he admitted lightly. "We have a vague idea of where we are going, but we have no idea whatever about how long it's going to take us to get there, and most of our passengers don't seem to mind.

They claim it's one of the reasons they like freighter travel."

"Well, of course—" Nora stammered, and added, "You did say Honduras was British, didn't you?"

The others were listening curiously. Nora was flushed and stammering, but it seemed that she must have an answer to her question.

"Well, yes, but it's nothing like the Bahamas or the more sophisticated tourist spots of the British colonies in the Caribbean," the captain explained. "It's far more Spanish than British, and very interesting. I'm sure you will enjoy going ashore there for a few hours."

Vera spoke for the first time, her voice taut and thin.

"How soon will we be there, Captain?"

"Well, we hope to make port there within the next twenty-four hours," he answered with a friendly smile. "But of course the Queen makes her own rules. So far, we've been making good time, but these waters can be a bit tricky. However, the motto of the freighter lines is, 'What's the rush?' "

Vera's brows drew together in a savage scowl and she got to her feet.

"If I'd had the slightest idea that we were just going to potter around in these waters, I'd never have come aboard," she snapped, and her tone was so ugly that they all stared at her, a trifle shocked. "I thought even a freighter had some sort of schedule that was followed with a reasonable amount of attention. This—this is ridiculous!"

The captain's expression was much less genial than usual, though he spoke as politely as before.

"I'm very sorry you are so dissatisfied with us, Mrs. Barclay, but surely the agent through whom you bought your ticket warned you that we stopped wherever ordered, by radio, to pick up cargo?"

Vera tried hard to control herself but her anger burst the frail bonds of that attempt, and she cried harshly, "Nobody told me that we'd just poke around, like an old woman hunting her thimble."

She turned then and went out of the salon, moving so

swiftly that she left behind her a small, resentful murmur. After a moment, Nora, her face scarlet, muttered a breathless, "Excuse me," and followed her mother.

MacEwen started to rise, met Claire's eyes, saw the tiny negative gesture Claire made and sank back into his seat, scowling.

Claire was relieved, a little later, to be able to make her escape from the table and to get out on deck where, as had become usual, Major Lesley was waiting for her.

He smiled a greeting, but she could see that he was troubled. And when a few minutes later Curt came up to where they were standing, she turned to him quickly.

"Captain's compliments, Miss Frazier," said Curt formally, "and he would appreciate it if you would come to his quarters for a few minutes."

"Of course." Claire's tone was quite as formal as she smiled an apology and walked away with Curt.

At the door of the captain's quarters, Curt threw open the door and stood aside, smiling, so Claire could precede him into the room. And then, to her complete astonishment, he followed her in, closed the door and ostentatiously turned the key in the lock.

Claire stared at him and then glanced about the room.

"But where is the captain?" she asked.

Curt gave her a small boy grin.

"On the bridge, where he will be for the next hour or so," he assured her. "I borrowed his quarters, since it has become of vital importance that I have an uninterrupted conversation with you. And this seems to be my only chance. You're always running away from me, or somebody is always intruding."

Claire said sharply, "If this is your idea of a joke, I don't find it at all funny."

Curt studied her as though he found the sight of her very rewarding.

"It's far from a joke and it's not intended to be funny, darling," he told her, his tone so matter of fact that the en-

dearment seemed to leap out at her as something so incredible that she could only gasp.

He indicated a chair and asked politely, "Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks, I prefer to stand."

"I think you'd better sit down," he insisted, and because it would have been absurdly undignified to argue, Claire obeyed him.

For a moment he seemed somewhat at a loss as to how to begin, and paced the brief length of the cabin and back again, one hand sunk in his pocket, the other rumpling his hair, his brows drawn together in a scowl of concentration.

"I've tried to get a chance to talk to you, Claire, but you're always slipping away," he said at last. "And then you drew a gun on me."

Claire stared at him in utter astonishment.

"I did no such thing!" she gasped.

He grinned wryly.

"Oh, yes, you did," he insisted. "You threw me a remark so loaded that there was no possible answer to it, and then you stalked out in a rage. And I've never been quite able to understand just why you felt you had to do that. Walk out on me, I mean. Especially when you'd hurled that loaded remark at me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Claire hated herself because she could not keep her voice steady.

"Sure you do," he insisted firmly. "It was something to the effect that I was much too—I believe the phrase you used was 'devastatingly good-looking'—for your taste. Now if that isn't a loaded remark, I've never heard one."

"You're not trying to tell me you aren't perfectly aware of your good looks and your well-practiced charm?" Claire mocked spitefully.

He studied her a moment longer and then said very quietly, "That hurt."

"I'm sorry—"

His eyes held hers, steady, measuring, yet with something

in their depths that was much warmer and that had the ability to make her heart beat uncomfortably fast.

"You're not a bit sorry," he countered grimly. "If only I knew what it was that I do—or that I am—that irritates you so, darling, I'd try to change it. I promise with all my heart—"

"This is utterly absurd," Claire said wildly. She tried to get to her feet and was unpleasantly startled to discover that her knees wouldn't support her. "I know it's a part of your job to charm feminine passengers—"

"That," Curt stated dispassionately, "is a lie."

Claire blinked and caught her breath as she studied him. His brown jaw was hard-set, a little ridge of muscle leaping along it, his eyes cold and bleak. Now he was looking at her as though he didn't like her at all, and she saw that he was coldly angry.

"I'm the captain's second-in-command," he stated coldly. "As such it's my job to take as many of the worrisome details of his job as I can on my own shoulders. 'Charming the feminine passengers' is certainly not a part of my job, as you so charmingly put it. Just why you should be so busy trying to cut me down to size, I have no idea. But before you leave this room, you're going to tell me—if it takes us until the end of the cruise! Is that clear?"

"It's nothing personal," Claire managed huskily. "It's just that I'm—well, a bit wary of good-looking men."

Curt studied her for a moment, and then he nodded.

"He must have been one gosh-awful fool," he said quietly.

Claire felt as though she had taken a step in the dark and stubbed her toe violently.

"He?" she stammered wildly, knowing it was inane but unable in her present state of mind to find anything better to say.

Curt nodded as though he, too, felt it was inane but answered it nonetheless.

"The man who hurt you so much that you're a bit soured on the whole sex," he said.

Claire looked away from him and felt her face flush with shame.

"She had a lot of money," she managed feebly.

"I still say he was a fool, if you were in love with him."

"I was very much—"

"Then I'm sorry, darling. Very sorry."

There was a brief moment of silence between them that warned her of the growing tension. Once more she tried to stand, and this time, by resting her hand on the chair arm, she managed it.

"May I go now?" she asked faintly.

He looked up at her from the chair where he had sat down, and his brows were knotted in a scowl.

"Of course not," he told her sternly. "We aren't nearly through."

Claire blinked, but sat down again and managed to meet his eyes.

"If I've been offensive," she stammered against that growing tension, "I apologize. I'm sorry—"

"Offensive is scarcely the word I'd have used," Curt told her. "But I suppose it will have to do. It's much milder than I'd have used. Still, now that we have reached some sort of understanding—" He broke off and his scowl deepened. "We have, haven't we?"

Claire gave a small, startled laugh that was faintly edged with hysteria.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know about that," she confessed.

"Well, at least I know now why you have been treating me like the lowest living form of animal life," he told her with a sudden briskness. "And you know that I'm in love with you and want to marry you—"

"What?"

He looked at her in puzzled surprise.

"Well, don't you?" he demanded.

Claire's eyes were round with astonishment, and her heart was beating so hard she felt certain he must hear it.

"How could I?" she asked faintly. "You never said so—"

"And what chance have I had to say anything to you that

couldn't be said in the presence of the entire passenger list and most of the crew?" he demanded sharply. "Why else do you suppose I lured you here tonight, except to settle the details?"

Claire asked faintly, "What details?"

"Why, the details of just when and where we will be married, of course." He seemed to think her question was too absurd to deserve an answer. "It can be at sea, with Captain Rodolfson performing the ceremony and the passengers and crew as witnesses; or it can be ashore, provided you don't make me wait too long. I really am very much in love with you, Claire. I'm thirty-two, and this is the first time I've ever said that to a woman."

Claire put her hands to her throbbing forehead and stared at him in helpless amazement.

"But—oh, for goodness sake!" she stammered faintly. "I haven't said I'd marry you, anywhere or at any time."

The eager light went out of his eyes and his face fell. His big, lean, powerful-looking fingers were twisted together, and his eyes were on them as though he could no longer endure to look at her.

"I know," he said huskily. "I thought maybe if I talked very fast, took an awful lot for granted and hurried you, I might bludgeon you into saying yes. I see I was wrong."

"You wouldn't really want a wife you'd have to bludgeon into marrying you, would you?" she asked.

Curt looked up at her, and their eyes tangled. And a warm, wild sweetness unlike anything she had ever known before slipped into her heart. She had a sudden desire to lean forward, frame his face between her two palms and kiss him! And the force, the unexpectedness of that desire shocked her so that for a moment her face revealed her emotion.

"I'd want you for my wife any darned way I could get you," he told her, and the force of his feeling made his voice a little harsh. "If I had to fling you over my shoulder, screaming and fighting the way the ancients are supposed to have done, I'd still want you for my wife."

He stood up after a moment and turned toward the door.

"I don't suppose there's any more to say," he said over his shoulder.

Claire said unsteadily. "You come right back here!"

Startled, afraid to hope, Curt turned, and her tremulous smile, the mist of tears in her eyes, lit a flame of hope in his eyes that made her want to put her arms about him.

"Yes, Claire?" he said huskily, while she struggled for words.

"Oh, Curt, you've taken me so by surprise," she told him, and her tremulous smile deepened. "Isn't that a corny phrase, though? 'This is *such* a surprise!' But it is, Curt. I'd—well, I hadn't dreamed you could—it's been so sudden. Golly, I'm digging up all the old corny phrases—"

"So stop it and put me out of my misery," Curt ordered, with a restrained violence that bespoke his inner hope and turmoil. "Is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

She held out her hand to him and then dropped it before he could grasp it and turned away from him.

"Oh, Curt, you'll have to give me a little time to get used to the idea," she stammered shakily.

"How much time?" he insisted.

"Just—just until I can be sure!"

"Then—I do have a chance?" His tone was ardent, pleading, ragged with desire.

"I knew Rick so long," she murmured as though she spoke only to herself. "It just sort of—well, grew into love. I was heart-broken when he ran out on me. And now, such a little while later, I don't seem to be able to remember what he looked like. That's very strange, isn't it?"

"Not so very," Curt countered, within reach of her, yet not touching her, though his eyes embraced her with an ardent yearning. "I think it just meant that you weren't so much in love with him as you were—well, used to him."

They had been standing so close to each other that she had felt he must surely hear the wild tumult in her heart. Now his arms went out and closed about her, gently, hesitantly at first; and then, as the warmth of her filled his

arms, his embrace tightened until they were so close they were almost a part of each other. And his head bent, and his mouth closed on hers for a moment of such exquisite tenderness that she felt as though she swam in an enchanted shining sea.

It was a moment that endured until she felt that she could no longer bear the exquisite tenderness of it. Then he held her a few inches away from him, and his eyes were glowing with a warmth and a radiance that made her heart skip another fast beat.

"So now we know," he said huskily, and though his voice was low, it held a note of such joy that it was like a shout.

"I'm beginning to," she answered, and stood on top-toe to kiss him again. "But, you'll have to give me a little time, Curt. This time I have to be—oh, so very sure!"

"You shall have all the time you need, dearest, now that I know there is a chance for me," he promised her. And his cheek was pressed against her hair as he held her so closely that she could feel her heart pounding against his, as though the two hearts sang a lovely melody made perfect by being together.

Chapter Fifteen

When at last she had said good night to him and was once more in her own stateroom, she dropped down on the side of the bed, her face in her hands. She had the feeling that she had been rushed headlong through space and was only now being given a chance to get her thoughts in order.

She got ready for bed at last and lay wide-eyed, staring into the moonlight that shimmered through her porthole. It was a gorgeous tropic night; the deck would be awash with moonlight; there might be flying fish to see!

She glanced at the clock on the small bed-side table and saw that the hands pointed to two A.M. She slid out of bed, walked to the porthole and looked out. Then, moving very quietly, she got into slacks and a thin shirt, thrust her bare feet into brown leather scuffs and walked to her door.

She opened it very cautiously, thoughtful of the slumber of her fellow passengers. And then she stood rigid, speechless, dazed. Curt was standing at the door of the Barclay cabin, which obviously he had just eased shut behind him.

She watched him with wide, incredulous eyes as he stood there for a moment, his head bowed. And then he went swiftly, cautiously away from the door toward the stairs that led up to the deck.

Claire watched until he had vanished, and then she closed her own door and dropped down on the edge of the bed. She was dazed and bewildered. What did it all mean? Just a little while ago, Curt had held her close in his arms and had asked him to marry him. He had said that he had never before asked any woman to marry him. Yet now he was hurrying stealthily away from Vera Barclay's cabin!

Suddenly her thoughts fell into place and she could even laugh a little, though shakily, at her jealous suspicions, because it was jealousy that made her so angry at seeing Curt leaving Vera's cabin at two in the morning. Now she told herself that Vera had not been alone in the cabin. Nora was there, of course. Vera had been very upset when she had learned that they were putting in at the port in British Honduras; she had left the salon in a fury. No doubt Nora had summoned Curt when she had been unable to quiet her mother.

That, Claire told herself with a relief so complete that it made her smile radiantly, was the whole explanation. Vera wasn't ill; if she had been, Curt would have summoned Claire to attend her. No, Vera was merely indulging in a tantrum and Nora, unable to quiet her, had asked Curt's help.

It was no more than that, Claire told herself, and was ashamed that within so short a time after Curt's protestation

of love, she should have plunged into such an abyss of doubt. She knew now that she was going to say "yes" to his proposal. And the thought brought a warm sweetness that made it more than ever necessary for her to get out on deck in the glorious moonlight. The cabin seemed suddenly too small to hold her great happiness, and once more she opened her door, cast a swift glance along the empty corridor, and moved with a nurse's accustomed silence toward the companionway.

She was passing the salon, which lay in darkness save for the moonlight that felt its way through the windows, when she heard the sound of sobbing, half-muffled, so desperate, so desolate that it stopped her in her tracks.

Somewhere in the salon someone was weeping heartbrokenly; someone whose grief was so deep that only tears could ease the unendurable tension. And Claire instinctively moved into the salon, intent on offering solace.

She traced the sound of weeping to a big leather-covered lounge that stood against the wall, and there, in the light from the moon and in the darkness to which by now her eyes were becoming accustomed, she saw a small, huddled heap of dim white. As she spoke softly, the sobbing broke off with a small, frightened gasp, and she realized the small heap of glimmering white was Nora.

"Why, Nora," she said softly, and sat down on the lounge beside the girl. "What's wrong, honey?"

"Claire?" stammered Nora.

"Of course, dear," Claire said gently, and put her arms about the girl. "What's wrong, dear? Why are you out here like this?"

"Oh, Claire," Nora barely managed to keep her voice down from a wail, "Mother turned me out. We had a terrific battle—look!"

She extended her hand to a beam of moonlight and revealed in its palm the broken fragments of the necklace of shells that MacEwen had given her.

"She jerked it off my neck and threw it down and *stamped* on it." Nora's voice rose, choked with sobs, as though at an outrage that was beyond recounting. "She said

Mac was a no-good and I mustn't ever speak to him again, and that the necklace was a cheap, tacky thing I should be ashamed to wear—"

She hid her face against Claire's shoulder and clung to her, sobbing wildly.

So this, Claire told herself, was why Curt had been leaving Vera's cabin. Nora had gone for him, and he had—She heard herself asking, "How long have you been out here, Nora?"

"Oh, since midnight, maybe earlier," Nora answered, and Claire felt as though a sudden numbing blow had fallen upon her.

"And did you go for Curt and ask him to quiet your mother?" Claire asked steadily, because she had to know.

Nora lifted her head in surprise.

"Why, no, Claire, of course not. Why should I?" she asked wonderingly. "I didn't want anyone to know about our fight—we've had a lot of them, but never one like this. Because for the first time, I stood up to her. That's why she turned me out of the cabin. She was so surprised that I talked back to her. I never did before—only she said such awful things about Mac. She's never let me have any friends; not even girl friends—"

Claire listened, and something died within her. So there had been no sane, logical reason for Curt to be leaving Vera's cabin at two in the morning. She had been so sure of him—and then a small, biting thought like the darting of a tiny, venomous snake reminded her, you were sure of Rick, too —remember?

"Oh, Claire, what am I going to do?" wailed Nora, and once more her head was hidden against Claire's breast and Claire's arms held her closely.

"We're going to put you to bed—" Claire began.

"Oh, no, she won't let me in," Nora protested, and shivered.

"We're going to put you to bed in my room, chick," Claire comforted her. "And in the morning, you'll find that things aren't nearly so bad as they seem at night. Come

along, and I'll give you a sedative. And when you wake up you'll find everything is fine. I promise."

She guided the girl down the corridor to her own room. Nora paused uncertainly in front of her mother's door and listened; and then, her tremulous mouth thinning a little, she walked on with Claire.

Claire turned down the covers of the bed and made herself smile at Nora's tear-sodden face, though she felt that, given the slightest encouragement, she herself could have wept as forlornly as Nora.

"In you go," she said briskly. She brought a cold washcloth and wiped the tears away and kissed Nora's brow lightly.

"But if I take your bed, Claire, where will you sleep?" Nora hesitated even as Claire waited to tuck her in.

"Oh, nurses are trained to sleep standing up, if necessary," Claire assured her briskly. "It's only a few hours until morning, anyway, and this chair is very comfortable. Now you take this tablet and get to sleep like a good girl. Do you hear?"

Nora's hand caught Claire's and held it tightly, and her young face was touched with shyness as she said awkwardly, "Oh, Claire, you're just the greatest! I hope some day I can be just exactly like you."

"Well, now, that's very sweet of you, Nora," Claire said smiling.

"Maybe I could even be a nurse?" Nora asked eagerly.

"You go to sleep now, and we'll talk about it in the morning," Claire promised.

Nora rested her cheek for a moment against Claire's hand, and then like a child snuggled down against the pillow and her eyes closed.

Claire sat down in the deep, comfortable chair in the warm darkness, safely out of reach of the vagrant moonbeams that spilled through the open portholes.

And aren't you the smart one, my girl? she asked herself savagely. Falling for this handsome devil, after the treatment you got from Rick! Being so sure this time that it was

love, and so sure that he loved you! Oh, how big a fool can you be!

Chapter Sixteen

When Nora woke Claire had showered in the tiny bathroom and was already dressed in a thin, cool frock for the morning. Seated at the small dressing table, she looked over her shoulder at Nora, who woke up with a deep yawn like a healthy child and looked about her, bewildered.

"Oh," said Nora, and some of the light went out of her sleep-flushed face. "I remember now. Oh, Claire, you didn't get any sleep at all, because I took your bed!"

"Of course I did, you silly." Claire's tone was light, mocking. "You hop out of bed now and scamper along to your own room and get ready for breakfast. I'll wait for you, if you don't take too long. I'm famished."

Nora scrambled out of bed, a boyish, plump figure in her cotton pajamas, and caught up the terry-cloth robe that lay across the foot of the bed.

"Oh, I'll hurry like the dickens, Claire, if you'll wait for me," she promised eagerly, and was gone.

Claire dropped the pretense of gaiety the moment the door closed behind the girl. She let the hairbrush drop to the table top and got up, to stand at the porthole looking out at a gorgeous tropical sky.

The thin grayness that had presaged the coming of dawn had been swallowed up in an almost violent burst of color against the sky, where the sun was just making itself ready to rise. There were purples such as she had never seen before: roseate pinks, blues—and none of it mattered in the least, she reminded herself grimly. Because inside of her, in her heart, there was an ugly, ashamed darkness. Twice now she had gone

through this ordeal of losing someone she deeply loved; and in all honesty she had to admit that the pain of losing Curt was much stronger than what she had felt for Rick. And that in itself only added to her feeling of deep humiliation. She had known Rick for so long that their lives had almost been one. She could have married Rick, she knew now in this moment of bitter self-analysis, and been moderately happy with him. But Curt! Much as she hated to admit it, marriage to Curt could have been something utterly glorious! She had been accustomed to Rick, she had known him a long time, they were used to each other. But Curt! She chopped her thoughts off short, her teeth setting as Nora came in, fresh and youthfully attractive in the brief white linen shorts and halter that constituted her daytime garb.

"Ready, Claire?" she asked eagerly. "Mother has already gone to breakfast. At least she's not in the cabin, so I imagine she's gone to breakfast."

"Fine! Then come along," said Claire, and linked her arm through Nora's as they walked down the corridor toward the dining salon.

Most of the other passengers were already at the table, and Curt stood swiftly as he saw Claire, and his eyes blazed a joyous welcome as he smiled and spoke her name. But the warm, eager light in his eyes was followed by surprise and bewilderment when she gave him the briefest of good mornings and went to her place beside the Major.

"Did you see the sunrise?" the Major asked eagerly, as Carl, smiling at Claire, placed an iced melon on her plate. "Wasn't it glorious?"

"Oh, yes, wasn't it?" Claire agreed with an enthusiasm so specious that even the Major was somewhat dashed.

Nora looked swiftly up and down the table, and as Carl brought her melon, asked eagerly, "Has Mother already had her breakfast, Carl?"

"No, miss," answered Carl, and glanced swiftly at Curt, who looked at Nora and then at Claire before he returned his attention to his breakfast.

"Did she ask for breakfast in her cabin?" Nora wondered.

"No, miss," Carl answered politely. "I haven't seen her since dinnertime last night."

"Have you?" Nora asked Curt.

"I'm afraid I haven't, Nora," Curt answered with a smile.

Puzzled, Nora asked, "But where can she be? She wasn't in our cabin when I went in to dress—" She caught herself, looked swiftly at the others and bent her head above her breakfast.

MacEwen came in late, and Claire saw that his eyes went first to Nora and then to the empty seat beside her. There he paused, looked down at Nora, and with his hand on the back of her mother's chair, asked, "Hi, Nora, mind if I sit here?"

"Mother's late this morning, Mac," Nora apologized. "She may be here any minute, so maybe you'd better not—"

"You're not wearing your necklace," MacEwen said accusingly.

Nora's hand went up to her bare throat, and color poured into her young face.

"Well, of course not, silly!" She managed to make her voice sound gay and care-free. "I'm wearing shorts and a halter. And one doesn't wear necklaces and bracelets and high-heeled pumps with shorts!"

"Well, of course I wouldn't know." MacEwen grinned and moved around the table to his accustomed place.

Major Lesley was rattling on to Claire as usual. Now and then Claire, feeling Curt's demanding gaze on her, glanced up, met his eyes briefly and coldly and looked back at the Major.

When breakfast was over, Claire came out of the dining salon to find Curt waiting for her, his face stern and set.

"Why the brush-off this morning?" he demanded without preliminary.

Claire lifted her chin and eyed him levelly.

"And why not? What's changed?" she asked.

Puzzled, angry he said very low, "Surely, after last night—"

Claire's smile was thin-lipped, mirthless, and her eyes met his straightly.

"After last night," she told him coldly, deliberately, "I find I like you even less than I once thought I did!"

"Oh, now wait a minute," Curt protested, and drew her aside so that they were not blocking the door to the dining salon, "I don't know what this is all about. Last night you gave me to understand that you didn't dislike me at all, quite the reverse—"

"Oh, really, Curt!" she mocked. "For a veteran of shipboard romances, you sound impossibly naive."

"A veteran of shipboard romances," he repeated as though he could hardly believe she had really said that, and his jaw was set hard, his eyes blazing. "Are you trying to tell me that's all it was—a shipboard romance?"

Claire widened her eyes at him in pretty astonishment.

"But, goodness, what else could it have been?" she mocked. "Surely you aren't going to tell me you didn't know that?"

"Claire, for some reason I can't understand, you're pretending as though last night meant nothing to you."

"But why should it?" Her tone was brittle. "Of course I think we rather rushed the thing a bit, don't you? After all, there are still weeks to go on the trip, though I will be leaving in Honolulu—"

"Claire, what's wrong?" His sharpness cut through her brittle amusement.

"Wrong?" Her wide eyes were mocking, bitter. "Why, what could possibly be wrong? You've done your duty by the company, and I'll be happy to give you a citation, if you like, that will convince them you really are their very successful glamour boy!"

He met her eyes straightly, frowning, deeply hurt, bewildered.

"Then last night meant nothing to you?" he asked at last.

"Oh, really! How could it? We were both just having fun."

"I wasn't!"

"Oh, weren't you?"

"And somehow I don't believe you were, either. You're not cheap and frivolous—" The words came from him with painful force.

"That's very kind of you, but after all, how could you possibly know? How could either of us know anything about the other? What could it possibly have been but just another shipboard romance in which once again you demonstrated your skill to amuse a susceptible feminine passenger?"

She could not somehow meet the look in his eyes that was at once blank with fury and helpless with a deep hurt. She turned away from him, moving swiftly toward the deck where Major Lesley was waiting for her.

She dared not look back. She kept her head high and her eyes straight ahead, and she joined Major Lesley with a relief that made her clutch his arm so tightly the little man looked at her in puzzlement.

The passengers were midway through lunch and apparently no one had noticed the absence of Nora and MacEwen when, to everyone's surprise, Captain Rodolfson strode into the salon and paused behind his chair at the head of the table. Seeing him there at any meal save dinner was a surprise that centered all attention upon him.

"I'm afraid I have some rather alarming news," he answered their startled, surprised glances. "One of our passengers is no longer aboard the ship."

There was a scattered murmur of amazement and eyes swept the table, checking who was absent. Captain Rodolfson went on, "Mrs. Barclay is missing."

Without waiting for anyone to ask the question uppermost in all their minds, Captain Rodolfson seated himself and his eyes swept the table from end to end.

"I would like to ask each of you some questions." Now he was every inch the stern-jawed, cold-eyed man of the sea, in supreme authority. "Mr. Wayne will make notes of questions and answers. Later, if it seems necessary, copies of statements will be typed and you will be asked to sign them. I must ask for your complete co-operation."

There were little shocked murmurs of assent, and Captain Rodolfson went on.

"Miss Barclay came to me shortly after ten, saying that she was unable to find her mother. A search was made of the

ship from stem to stern. It was proven that Mrs. Barclay was no longer aboard."

"But, Captain," Mrs. Burke cried out, "what could have happened?"

"I'm hoping that we can find out something of what happened, anyway," he told her curtly. "I've radioed the shipping line, and they are conducting a search of these waters by every available means. And now I would like to know when Mrs. Barclay was last seen. We'll begin with this side of the table and come back the other side. Ready, Curt?"

"Ready, sir," Curt answered, pencil poised above a pad of paper.

"You, Mrs. Burke," Captain Rodolfson began, "when did you see Mrs. Barclay last?"

"Why, here at dinner last night, Captain," Mrs. Burke answered at once. "Remember how upset she was when she learned we were putting into port again?"

Captain Rodolfson nodded. "You didn't see her after that?"

"Why, no, Captain."

Captain Rodolfson nodded and moved on to the next passenger, whose answers were the same. The questioning had gone halfway around the table when Nora and MacEwen came in, and all eyes turned to them, shocked, sympathetic, yet deeply puzzled.

Nora was white, her face swollen with tears, and MacEwen's arm was about her, guiding her to her accustomed chair. He sat down in the one her mother had used and kept his arm about her shoulders and held one of her hands.

Captain Rodolfson's cold eyes warmed a little, as did his voice.

"I'm sorry, my dear child," he said gently, "but I think you'd better tell all of us just what happened after dinner last night, when you followed your mother to your stateroom."

Nora lifted shamed eyes to meet his.

"All of it?" she spoke so softly it was almost a whimper.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm afraid we must have the whole story," the captain told her.

MacEwen's arm tightened about her, he murmured some-

thing in her ear, and Nora braced herself to face a bitter and humiliating ordeal.

"We quarreled," she said huskily. "Mother was very angry when she saw a trinket Mac had given me, and she jerked it off my neck and stamped on it. And for the first time in my life, I talked back to her. That seemed to make her even more angry, and she struck me—" Her voice broke off. She struggled to regain it and glanced up and down the table before she managed to say, "She was—she had been—she was—"

"Drunk," MacEwen supplied the ugly word. Nora flinched from it, but they saw her accept it.

"She rarely ever drank," she said faintly. "She would never have struck me—please don't believe she made a habit of that—"

"And after that, Nora?" asked Captain Rodolfson gently.

Nora drew a long, hard breath and tilted her chin, tears slipping unheeded down her face.

"And then she opened the door of the stateroom and pushed me outside and locked the door on me," she whispered piteously. "I was in the salon when Claire came for me and took me in with her. And this morning when I got up, the cabin door was unlocked and I went in to get dressed. And Mother wasn't there. She isn't anywhere on the ship—not anywhere at all!"

It was a cry of such childish grief and at the same time such adult heartache that there were murmurs of sympathy around the table, and MacEwen said huskily to Captain Rodolfson, "May I take her out now, sir?"

"I'm truly sorry, MacEwen. I'm afraid not. Not quite yet."

There was a babble of voices, and Captain Rodolfson had some difficulty in quieting them so that the questioning could be resumed. Apparently no one had seen Vera since dinner last night, until the question reached Claire.

For a moment she sat very still, and then she turned her eyes on Curt and said quite clearly, "I think, Captain, that Mr. Wayne must have been the last person to see Mrs. Barclay."

Curt stared at her, frowning, and Claire managed the faintest of smiles that was scarcely more than a grimace as she went on relentlessly.

"I saw him leaving her cabin at two o'clock this morning," she stated so quietly that for a stunned moment no one seemed quite to realize what she had said.

Chapter Seventeen

Claire saw the astonishment melt from Curt's eyes, to be replaced by an anger so blazing hot that she almost, but not quite, quailed beneath it.

"So that's what you believe!" His voice was a thin thread of sound that barely reached her ears above the sudden hubbub about the tale.

"Well, Curt?" demanded Captain Rodolfson, managing to silence the hubbub, his face showing something of the amazement Claire's words had brought to him.

"Miss Frazier is partly mistaken," said Curt clearly. "I was leaving Mrs. Barclay's cabin door, not her room. I had not been inside the room, nor had I seen her since dinner."

"And what had taken you to the cabin door, Curt? Speak up, man—you know as well as I do that we've got to get to the bottom of all this."

"One of the crewmen, swabbing the decks, heard a woman crying in the salon and came to summon me," Curt answered quietly. "He knew something should be done about it and quite right he was. I went into the salon—"

"But I didn't see you!" Nora stammered, wide-eyed.

Curt smiled at her. "Of course you didn't," he told her gently. "I knew you must have quarreled with your mother, and I went down to see what I could do about it. When she wouldn't answer the knock at her door, I went back to

my own quarters to arrange a place for you to finish the night. When I came back, I saw you and Claire going down the corridor to her room, so I knew she could do a much better job of taking care of you than I could. And I thought you need not find out that anyone except Claire had known about whatever it was that you and your mother were on the outs about."

Captain Rodolfson had listened with the closest attention, scowling.

"So you didn't see Mrs. Barclay after dinner?" he probed.

"I did not."

"When you knocked at her door, there was no answer?"

"None at all, sir." There was no doubting the firmness, the utter conviction of his voice.

The questioning moved on, and Claire leaned closer to Curt and asked softly, "Is that the truth?"

Curt's eyes were cold and bleak.

"Would you like me to take an oath on it?" he asked.

Color poured into her face and her eyes were shamed.

"I'm sorry, Curt," she whispered unsteadily.

There was no softening of his hard, set face or warming of the bleak look.

"I should think you would be," he told her savagely, and returned to his note-taking.

It was not until Major Lesley was reached in the inquiry that there was any break in the steady flow of denials that anyone had seen Vera since dinner.

Major Lesley was in obvious distress when the captain asked the question.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," the Major's voice was almost a wail, "I'm so terribly afraid, sir, that I know what must have happened. And worst of all, I know why!"

He looked piteously at Nora, who was staring at him.

"I'm so terribly sorry, my dear," he said softly.

"Then you did know all along," Nora whispered as though even now she could not make herself accept that fact.

"Not from the very first, my dear," Major Lesley told Nora, as though only they two were concerned. "Later, I became

sure. But I tried to tell her, Nora, that I was no longer on duty, that I'd keep the secret. I gave her my word. Since she was leaving the country anyway and I had retired from active duty, I couldn't see that any good purpose would be served by revealing what I knew. But she became overwrought when she discovered we were putting in at a British port because, of course, extradition is possible under British law—"

The captain was becoming more and more puzzled, and his color was rising.

"What the devil are you talking about, Major? Speak up, man, if you know what happened to Mrs. Barclay," he demanded in a voice that his crewmen had long ago learned meant they must step lively.

"Oh," said Major Lesley innocently, "Mrs. Barclay went overboard, sir."

There was a stunned moment as though, with horror piling on horror, surprise on surprise, no one could manage any answer or make a sound.

"You mean she was murdered?" cried the captain sharply.

"Oh, dear me, no, sir, no! I mean she went overboard of her own will."

Nora gave a little moan and hid her face against MacEwen's shoulder.

"Suicide, then? But why?" thundered the captain.

Major Lesley looked once more at Nora, pleading for her forgiveness.

"I'm afraid I'll have to tell them, Nora," he said piteously.

"You'd better, Major and be quick about it," Captain Rodolfson raged.

"Mrs. Barclay, sir, was a notorious confidence woman and she knew I'd recognized her," said Major Lesley with painful brevity.

"A *what?*" cried the captain.

"You see, sir, before I retired I worked for a firm of private investigators," Major Lesley said quietly, having himself under better control now that he had mentioned his former work. "One of the best in the business, if I may say so. Mrs. Barclay cut a wide swath. She was very clever, even

brilliant. She would appear in a city, establish herself as a wealthy matron with a young daughter, enter the daughter in a fashionable school and then manage to get a job somewhere where she could have the handling of considerable sums of money, always explaining that she found it very tiresome to be idle and letting it be known that she worked for career satisfaction, not for the money. And then one day, Mrs. Barclay and her daughter would be strangely missing—along with a very large sum of cash."

"A cheat and a swindler," marveled the captain.

"She was very clever and very elusive," Major Lesley went on painfully. "Once or twice the law caught up with her. But she never came to trial; there was always something in the case that her swindled employers preferred not to have known—"

"Blackmail?" demanded the captain sternly.

Major Lesley nodded unwillingly.

"It would seem so, sir," he agreed, and kept his eyes carefully away from Nora, huddled close in MacEwen's arms. "So you see, when she saw me aboard the ship, she jumped to the conclusion that I was pursuing her relentlessly, that I meant to turn her over to the authorities."

He glanced about the faces along the length of the table, and there was more than a hint of apology in his manner and in his voice.

"I suppose I should have." There was only a trace of defensiveness in his voice. "It was probably my duty, only—well, I was so tired of being a man-hunter. I'd never liked hunting down some hapless wretch, though I knew it had to be done. But once I'd retired and had set out to fulfill a boyhood dream aboard the Highland Queen—well, I just hadn't the heart to bring her down. I tried to tell her so; I thought I had convinced her that she was safe."

"That," snapped Mr. Hennessy, speaking for the first time and in a tone of stern censure, "is the most outrageous thing I've ever heard of. How dared you neglect your duty—"

"But I told you, I've retired," Major Lesley pleaded.

"Not from the human race, I hope." Mr. Hennessy was

deeply indignant. "And a woman like that is—was—a menace to all decent people."

He broke off so sharply that Claire knew his wife had kicked him beneath the table, and he glanced at her, then followed the direction of her eyes to Nora, and flushed.

"I'm sorry—" he began, and then, his brows drawn together in an angry frown, "Or am I? What about the girl, Major?"

Nora lifted a white, terrified face, and Major Lesley said swiftly, "Nora was never implicated in any of her mother's illegal activities."

"Oh, but that's nonsense!" snorted Hennessy. "She must have known what was going on. How could she help it?"

"I didn't, Mr. Hennessy, truly," said Nora, steadying her voice with an effort. "I suppose that makes me sound an awful fool. But I didn't know until we boarded the Highland Queen. Oh, I always wondered why we rarely stayed more than six months in a place. I was always making friends, getting good grades in school, and then I'd come home some afternoon and Mother would be packing. And she'd say so gaily, 'Hurry up and pack, baby—we're off to new places. This one bores me.' And off we'd go."

They were all watching her, listening to her, and there was pity in their eyes. Even Mr. Hennessy looked a little ashamed of himself.

"If you knew nothing of what she was up to, where did you think the money came from that put you in a fashionable school and no doubt gave you good-looking clothes, probably a car," he wanted to know.

"Oh, Mother told me my father had left it to us, that he had been wealthy and that she liked to travel, but that she wanted me to have an education—" She broke off and looked piteously about the table. "I know I must have been a fool to have accepted all that. But how was I to know? I just thought she was bored and wanted to live somewhere else, until this time. I wanted so much to graduate with my class. I'd only been in it a few months, but I'd worked very hard and I'd looked forward to all the graduation parties and proms

and things. So when she said we were leaving, just two months before graduation, I said I wouldn't go, and then she had to tell me. And I was terrified, and then when she saw Major Lesley and was so sure she had seen him before—" She spread her hands in a little gesture of hopelessness.

"I have a very good memory for faces," said the Major with due modesty. "Mrs. Barclay had managed to evade newspaper photographers on the one or two occasions when she had been apprehended. But I happened to be present one afternoon when she was arraigned. I've never forgotten her. She was so very casual, so much the great lady, laughing up her sleeve at the court, and when the company she had victimized dropped the charges against her, for reasons no one but the head of the company, I imagine, will ever know, she swept from the courtroom like an empress. No, I never forgot her. I knew I'd seen her somewhere. I'm a little surprised that she should have remembered me, though on her way out of the courtroom, she ran to avoid a newspaper photographer and stumbled into me. We collided, and she almost went down. I steadied her, and so she got a good long look at my face. And I got a good look at her face. And when we met aboard the Queen, we both remembered."

He glanced around the table, shrinking a little from the wide-eyed gaze of the other passengers. There was a small, taut silence, and then the captain sighed heavily and passed his hand over his balding head as he peered sharply at the Major, who met his eyes diffidently.

"And that's why you believe she jumped overboard some time last night," he said heavily, and his tone made it a statement rather than a question.

"I can't see what else could have happened, Captain, do you?" the Major asked painfully.

"I'm sure it must have," said Nora. And now she had withdrawn herself from MacEwen's embrace and was facing them all with a young, very touching dignity. "And I'm terribly sorry for all the trouble she and I have caused. Please, Captain, may I be excused?"

It was like a well-mannered, carefully brought up child

who wishes to leave the table before its elders, and the captain cleared his throat before he could answer. When he did his voice was gruff, yet somehow gentle as though he, too, had been deeply touched.

"Of course, child, of course."

She got to her feet and turned toward the doorway, and instantly MacEwen was on his feet, following her, leaving a silence behind them that no one seemed in any hurry to break.

Captain Rodolfson got to his feet at last and looked the length of the table and said stiffly, "So that's it, I suppose, until whatever authorities the line wishes to send aboard at our next port of call. You'll hold yourself in readiness, Major, for whatever questions they wish to ask; they will probably wish to question all of you again."

Chapter Eighteen

Claire came upon MacEwen just outside Vera's cabin, and he was scowling blackly. As he saw her, he came swiftly to meet her, his scowl lifting slightly.

"Look, here, Claire, you've got to make her see reason," he burst out swiftly. "She has some crazy idea that because her mother was—well, not quite what she seemed, I should have nothing more to do with her. As if it made any difference to me what her mother was. It's Nora I love and want to marry."

"Oh, Mac, you must give her a little time to pull herself together after this horrible shock," Claire pointed out.

"Well, sure, I'll give her all the time in the world, only I want to help her! She needs me, and I want to be with her, see her through. I don't think she realizes what this investigation is going to mean. She's going to be right in the

center of it, and it could be pretty rough. She mustn't go through it alone. She's got to let me look after her, stand up for her—"

"Oh, Mac, that's good of you!" said Claire, and felt tears in her throat.

MacEwen glared at her as though she had offered him some deadly insult.

"Good, nothing," he exploded. "I love her! Can't you get that through your thick head?"

He broke off, colored, and said brusquely, "Sorry, I didn't mean that, of course—that you have a thick head. It's just that it burns me up that you don't realize that I love her, that I want to marry her and take care of her for the rest of her life!"

"That's wonderful, Mac, and I'll talk to her," Claire promised him.

"Just get her to let me talk to her, that's all I'm asking you," he growled, and strode off down the corridor.

Claire watched him go, and told herself that in spite of all the ugly disclosures, in spite of all the revelations about her mother, Nora was a very lucky girl. Then she turned and rapped softly at the locked door.

"Nora, darling, it's Claire," she said through the locked panel.

There was silence for a moment, and then the key turned in the lock, the door swung open and Nora stood there, head up, her face swollen with tears, but with a courage that Claire found quite touching.

"It's no use, Claire," she said, her voice husky with tears. "I won't let Mac get involved in all this mess. I am never going to see him again."

"Well, does that mean that I can't come in and talk with you, Nora?" asked Claire gently, smiling.

Nora stepped back and turned her face away.

"I'm surprised anybody would want to so much as speak to me now," she said huskily, and turned swiftly, head high. "It was all true, you know, what that little Major Lesley said. She was—she did—oh, it's all so horrible."

She burst into tears, and Claire drew her close and held her until the fury of the wild sobbing lessened. And then Nora lifted her head once more, and there was fear and a touch of panic in her eyes.

"What will they do to me, Claire?" she asked uneasily.

Claire hesitated, and then she answered honestly, "I don't know, honey. But you told them at the table you knew nothing about what was going on."

"I didn't, Claire, truly I didn't!" Nora said earnestly. "There always seemed to be plenty of money to live any way we liked. And she said my father had left it to us. I suppose I was all kinds of a fool to have been so stupid!"

"She didn't want you to suspect, Nora," Claire said quietly. "She was very clever, Major Lesley said; and she told me once that all she had wanted in life was to see you supplied with everything you could possibly want."

Nora nodded slowly. "And everything she did was for me," she finished Claire's thought, and once more the tears came. "She was so happy when we were able to get this passage. She'd been telling me that as soon as I graduated, she was going to take me on a long cruise and we'd see all sorts of fabulous places. So when she told me that we were leaving immediately and that she had managed to buy a passage that had been canceled at the last minute, but we had to go then—oh, Claire, Claire, I wish I hadn't fought her then. I wanted so to stay and graduate—"

Claire held her and made small, soothing murmurs and let her pour out the whole story. Her grief and her shame were deep, and Claire knew that to talk them out was good therapy. When at last Nora lay exhausted on her bed, Claire bent above her and drew the thin cover over her.

"You rest now, darling, and after dinner, you must let Mac tell you what he has in mind," she began.

"Oh, no, no, Claire! Mac mustn't get involved! He mustn't! I won't let him," Nora protested wildly.

"I'm afraid you haven't much to do about that," Claire reminded her wryly. "He's already involved, by his own wish,

and you're going to have your hands full. You see, he's determined to marry you."

"After I come out of prison? He's going to wait for me? Now isn't that just dandy!" Nora's sneer was distinctly wobbly.

"You don't know yet whether you'll go to prison, you silly child," Claire scolded her gently. "Personally, I strongly doubt that you will, unless they can prove that you were a willing accomplice, and I'm quite sure they can't."

Nora looked up from the bed at her, a dawning hope in her eyes.

"Do you really believe that, Claire?" she asked with a husky eagerness.

"That you won't go to prison?"

"That I wasn't a willing accomplice?"

"Well, of course I do, Nora," Claire told her quite honestly. "You aren't a good enough actress to have gotten away with it, even if you had wanted to, which I'm sure you wouldn't. Now you rest and relax, and I'll stop in to see you again before dinner."

Claire wandered to where MacEwen stood leaning against the railing, morose and sullen.

"Oh, it's you," he greeted her in a tone that was definitely unfriendly. "Pull up a chair and set a spell, if you must."

"The warm graciousness of your greeting overwhelms me," Claire told him icily.

MacEwen straightened and eyed her carefully.

"You, too, huh?" he mused aloud.

"What do you mean, 'you, too'?" she snapped.

"Just that you seem to be in the same mood I'm in, so shall we sheath our weapons and try to kill a few minutes with idle chatter?" he drawled, and added, "I take it you talked to Nora. She wouldn't let me."

Claire nodded. "I'm going to take her home with me for a visit with my parents—" she began.

"Oh, no, you're not!" MacEwen protested sharply. "I'm going to marry her and take her home with me—for keeps, whether she likes the idea or not."

Claire studied him curiously.

"That poses an interesting problem," she commented dryly. "What do you propose to do? Drag her by the hair, screaming and fighting, to the nearest minister and hold a gun on her while she says, 'I do'?"

MacEwen's jaw was set and hard.

"If I have to, I'll do exactly that," he said grimly. "She loves me, I love her, we're both quite alone in the world without a family. So why shouldn't we get married and start a family of our own?"

"No reason at all, as far as I can see, except that Nora feels she will disgrace you if she marries you."

"Disgrace me? What sort of idiotic nonsense is that?" snorted MacEwen.

"She's Vera Barclay's daughter. This will make quite a display in the newspapers, I am afraid. A suicide at sea and the reason for it—" Claire tried to point out.

"That doesn't have to affect Nora. She won't be Nora Barclay, she will be Mrs. MacEwen Russell, and any disgrace to be brought on the name will be my own affair," MacEwen told her curtly.

Claire studied him for a moment, and suddenly she asked, "Just who are you, anyway, Mac?"

MacEwen grinned at her tautly.

"Don't you mean what am I?" he mocked her.

"Well, frankly, I do mean just that. You're not a writer, that much I know."

"Oh, do you now?" His tone was mocking, derisive, but not offensively so. He sounded honestly curious.

"I should have said you haven't done any writing aboard, or if you have it's been in longhand."

"And you don't think writers ever write without a typewriter?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Well, it so happens that I am a writer, but I'm on leave at the moment," he told her as though he had tired of the mocking, derisive game. "I've just delivered a book to my publishers on which I've worked for four years. And I don't

want to see a typewriter for at least another year. I want to relax, forget writing, let my mind fill up with new impressions, new ideas, different backgrounds. If you're worried about how I'll support Nora, you needn't. I'm quite solvent financially and can give her anything she wants, within reason. And with it, I can give her something far more than just financial security. I can give her the assurance that she will never again be slapped around or beaten."

Claire asked quietly, "Do you really believe her mother abused her, Mac?"

"Don't you?" His tone was dry, ugly.

Claire hesitated for a moment, and then she said thoughtfully, "I find it hard to believe, Mac."

"Do you now?" His tone was mocking, and now there was a definite offensiveness in it. "Then why do you think Nora tried to do away with herself? You can't deny that she did."

"But Vera told me that she loved the girl, that everything she had ever done was for Nora."

"Considering the way she cheated and swindled anybody who trusted her, right and left, if that funny little squirt of a Lesley is right, that is hardly a compliment to Nora, is it?"

"No, I suppose not," Claire agreed reluctantly. "But she wanted nice things for Nora: a good education, clothes, all the things girls that age want."

"There's only one thing a decent, straightforward, honest girl like Nora wants, Claire. And that's to be loved and cherished," Mac said grimly. "And from me that's exactly what she's going to get. She's the only girl I ever wanted to marry and I intend to."

Claire said, "Well, hooray for you!"

Mac looked at her, and a faint, reluctant grin touched his stern mouth.

"Oh, you've been swell to Nora, and believe me, I'm grateful," he told her with the air of one who wanted to be perfectly fair. "But I'm taking over from here on out."

"I'm very glad, Mac, because she needs you."

"Not half as much as I need her," Mac said swiftly. "I've

batted around on my own since I was knee-high to a tadpole. I suppose I must have had a father and mother somewhere. Most people do. But I never knew either of them. I was just me, Mac, the Lone Wolf! Well, now the Lone Wolf has found a mate, and nothing on earth, above it or beneath it, is going to take her away from me!"

And as though the fervor of emotion in his voice had embarrassed him, he stood up and strode away, hands jammed into his jacket pockets.

Chapter Nineteen

Dinner that night was a rather strained affair. Curt, taking his accustomed place, was a little late. As he seated himself, he glanced at the captain's empty place and said courteously, "Captain asks to be forgiven for not being here. He is quite busy in his quarters with various formalities that must be attended to before we dock tomorrow."

Mrs. Burke leaned forward and glanced at Nora's and at MacEwen's empty chairs.

"But where is the girl, and that nice young man? Aren't they coming to dinner?" she asked curiously.

Curt smiled at her. "Captain has invited them to dinner in his own quarters. There are some things he thinks Nora can shed some light on."

"Well, I suppose that's true," Mrs. Burke admitted, and added, "And Mr. Russell? Was he in on all this ugly mess?"

"Oh, no, MacEwen first met Nora when they came aboard," Curt answered, and his smile warmed faintly. "He seems to be determined to stand by her in any emergency that may develop."

"Then he is in love with her. Isn't that wonderful?" Mrs. Burke beamed happily and glanced across at Mrs. Hennessy.

"I told you so, Amy. I'm rarely ever wrong about such things."

Curt said briskly, "The formal inquiry tomorrow, as soon as we dock, will take care of all this. Have any of you been through the Canal? It's quite an interesting experience."

And he launched into a long and detailed account of what they would shortly experience. He had not once glanced at Claire since he had taken his place at the table, and his manner was cool, aloof, as though she were not there within the reach of his hand, the sound of his lowest whisper.

Gradually the table talk became general, and eventually the meal was over. As they rose from the table and congregated in small groups preparing for the nightly card games, Claire followed Curt out of the salon. In the corridor, as he was walking away from her, she called to him.

He turned back, glancing at her with a cool, detached look as though she had been someone he had never seen before.

"Yes, Miss Frazier?" he said with cold courtesy.

"Curt, please—I have to talk with you."

"Of course, Miss Frazier."

Claire searched his face, his cold, hostile eyes.

"If you aren't too busy—" Her voice stumbled.

"Why, how could I ever be too busy to entertain a feminine passenger, my dear Miss Frazier?" he mocked. "Remember me? I'm the lines' glamour boy, whose duty it is to entertain all the feminine passengers at any time. You said so yourself."

"I'm terribly sorry, Curt," she stammered. "That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I didn't think you'd left anything unsaid."

Major Lesley emerged from the salon, gave them a startled glance and scurried like a small rabbit out of the corridor to the deck.

"Could we go out on the deck, Curt?" Claire pleaded.

"Why not? Tropic moonlight, flying fish, the phosphorescence on the water—all very romantic and part of the lines' service to feminine passengers," Curt drawled. And his

tone made the words a derisive taunt as he bowed and motioned for her to precede him.

Out on the deck, Claire lifted her hot, shamed face gratefully to the fresh, salt-tangy wind and moved forward to the railing where, in the shadow of a lifeboat, she turned to look up at him.

"Curt, I'm sure you know what I want to say," she began huskily.

"I'm afraid I haven't the vaguest idea."

"Oh, Curt, don't be like that!" she wailed. "I'm so terribly sorry about everything I said. I didn't mean it, Curt. What I did mean was what I said in the captain's quarters last night, not what I said this morning. I do love you, Curt—I know it now."

There was a small, taut silence in which she held her breath, waiting for him to take her into his arms, to forgive her, to make things right between them. Instead he leaned on the rail and looked out over the dark water, with the phosphorescent trail visible here and there as the sturdy old ship plodded her slow way along.

"I don't think you do, Claire," said Curt after what seemed to her an endless wait. "If you had loved me, you wouldn't have jumped to the wrong conclusion when you thought you saw me leaving Mrs. Barclay's room. You wouldn't have hidden in your own room, placing the worst possible construction on what you saw. You would have taken it for granted that I had some logical, decent reason for being there. You might have offered to help, in case I needed your help. Instead you just skulked into your own cabin, and then this morning blasted me with every ugly thing you could think of to say. No, Claire, you're not in love with me. Not the smallest, infinitesimal bit. You can't be in love with someone without trusting him. And you showed me with insulting clarity just how little trust you had in me."

There was so much truth in what he was saying that she could only shrink, as though the words had been physical blows, and feel her heart dying within her.

After a long moment she moistened her dry lips and managed words.

"You expect an awful lot, don't you, Curt?"

He straightened and turned toward her; in the shadow of the lifeboat she could only guess at his expression.

"Why, yes, Claire, I suppose I do," he agreed at last. "I'm not a callow kid, you know. A man doesn't reach my age without learning a little something about women. As you so sweetly pointed out, aboard the Highland Queen part of my duty is entertaining the feminine passengers. A fellow learns quite a bit that way. I'd never been in love before; I'd rather side-stepped it. I was wary, suspicious if you like, but then you came along and I thought, I've found her at last—my girl! I was as sure you trusted me as I was that I trusted you. It didn't occur to me for a moment that your love was such a cheap and flimsy thing that it would come apart the first moment any stress was placed on it."

Claire winced beneath the scathing indictment, and then she realized that if ever she was going to put things right between them, she had to fight now, that minute.

"I trusted Rick Massey," she said quietly.

She could feel the small start of surprise Curt gave as he looked down at her through the shadows.

"Rick Massey? Who's he?" he asked curiously.

"The man whose jilting sent me off on this cruise," Claire told him levelly. "We'd known each other for years. We had planned to be married as soon as he finished his year in residency; and then he eloped with a wealthy patient."

Curt was silent for a moment that seemed to her all but endless.

"And so, because one man has proved himself faithless, you took it for granted every other man in the world was equally so," he drawled at last.

"I'd known him for so long." Her voice stumbled painfully. "I'd known you such a little while. Oh, Curt, can't you understand?"

"Why, yes," he said at last, and his tone held no warmth at all. "I think I can understand very well. You were on the

rebound from him and I was available. That's about it, isn't it?"

There was a silence she found all but impossible to break, and after a moment he went on slowly, "As a matter of fact, Claire, it's probably just as well that it's come to this. It wouldn't have worked, you know."

"It wouldn't?" she whispered.

"Of course not." His tone was brusque. "You can see for yourself it could never have worked. Marriage for you and me, I mean. I couldn't give up the sea—"

"I wouldn't ask you to."

"Because," he plowed on as though she hadn't spoken, "it's all I know of a way to make a living. It's all I've ever really wanted to know. And you wouldn't be happy living aboard ship."

"Captain Rodolfson's wife was."

"She was very different," Curt stated flatly. "She'd never had a career or been out on her own or put down roots ashore as you have."

"It all boils down to the fact that you were mistaken in thinking you love me, is that it?"

He turned toward her in the shadows, his expression one she could not see.

"Why, no, it just means I was mistaken about you being in love with me," he pointed out with brutal candor. "You said just a shipboard romance; I think that's all it was with you. With me—well, with me it was quite different. I felt I'd come into safe harbor after a very rough and stormy voyage. That was where I made my mistake."

Claire drew a deep, hard breath.

"And you'd like to leave it at that?" she asked huskily.

"I don't see what else we can do, do you?"

Claire set her teeth for a moment, and then she flung up her head and faced him in the shadows.

"Why, no, I don't suppose there is anything else since you're so stiff-necked and arrogant and so convinced that I've insulted you beyond any possibility of forgiveness," she said harshly. "So all right. We'll leave it at that. But it seems

to me I've stripped my pride to ribbons and tied it up in a slovenly bundle and offered it to you, and that's something I'll never do again, you may be very sure! I did say nasty things to you this morning; I did jump to an ugly conclusion when I saw you last night at Vera's door. I've asked your forgiveness. And you've been too stiff-necked to accept it. And that means that you aren't really in love with me, either. If you were, you'd understand. And since you don't want to—then by all means leave it at that!"

Curt made a gesture, and she drew back.

"Maybe you're quite right, after all." She spat the words at him furiously. "Maybe it was just a shipboard romance. Maybe I'm not in love with you; maybe it was just the rebound from Rick's jilting. But whatever it was, I'll forget you. I'll get over you, don't you ever doubt that. Why, in time, I'll forget the color of your eyes, the sound of your voice, as I'm sure you'll forget mine. And that'll be just dandy, because that's the way it's got to be."

She turned swiftly, evading his hand, ignoring his voice, and went running back across the deck to the corridor and along it to her own room.

Chapter Twenty

She had no idea how long she had huddled there, rocked by the anguish of knowing that she had lost Curt forever, when there was a sudden knock at her door. She sat very still, not quite daring to hope that Curt stood outside that door, that he had come to tell her that after all—

She managed to get the door open, and as she saw Nora and MacEwen there, her heart did a nose-dive, falling painfully down a long flight of steps, bruising itself on each step.

"Oh," she managed huskily, unable to conceal the bitter disappointment that racked her, "it's you."

MacEwen asked politely, "You were expecting maybe Santa Claus?"

But Nora was saying eagerly, "Claire, would you like to go to a wedding? Right this very minute?"

"A wedding?" Claire repeated, bewildered.

"And don't you try to talk her out of it," MacEwen said belligerently. "It took me three hours to talk her into it."

"The captain will marry us, Claire," Nora went on eagerly. "He's got the authority, since we are way outside the twelve-mile limit. And I wanted you to be with me. Will you, Claire?"

MacEwen was still belligerent, but obviously uneasy.

"Be a good guy, Claire," he pleaded anxiously. "She's got to have somebody that belongs to her to stand up for her when we dock tomorrow. And that's going to be me!"

"Claire, you don't think I'm being heartless, so soon after Mother—" Nora's voice broke and fell into silence, but her eyes filled out the plea her lips could not finish, and Claire took the girl warmly into her arms.

"It's exactly what she would want for you, Nora, and I'm very happy for you both," she said gently.

MacEwen beamed with relief.

"You had me scared for a minute there," he admitted frankly. "Women are sort of funny people sometimes. I was afraid you'd try to talk her into waiting until she was sure, or some such fool thing."

Nora looked up at him radiantly and slipped her hand into his.

"I couldn't be any more sure if we waited a hundred years," she told him joyously. "The only thing I hesitated about was—well, what may happen tomorrow."

"Whatever happens, I'll be right there with you. And anyway, nothing unpleasant is going to happen to you tomorrow," MacEwen told her firmly and put his arm about her. "Well, come on, girls; let's get moving. Mustn't keep the captain waiting."

Claire looked up at him and at the girl. They were so young, so completely vulnerable, so touching in their frank adoration of each other. And that was the way it should be, she told herself desolately, as they made their way to the captain's quarters—two people so much in love that it would never occur to either of them to doubt the other, not for so much as a single instant.

As they stepped into the captain's quarters, she saw Curt in frowning consultation with the captain. The next moment Curt looked up, saw her, and the frown was erased by a sternness that told her he had in no way changed his mind since they had stood together beside the rail and she had groveled for his forgiveness, which he had refused.

Captain Rodolfson smiled a warm greeting at them and at Claire and said, "I'm very glad you're here, Miss Frazier. You and Curt can be witnesses. Are we ready?"

"All ready, sir," said MacEwen happily. He took Nora's hand in his and smiled down into her lifted face as they stood before the captain, who held his Bible in his hand, already open at the marriage service.

Listening to the mellow, stately phrases, with their awesome beauty, Claire felt the sting of tears in her eyes as she looked at these two young people, the girl who had gone through so much darkness and grief, but was now emerging into the warmth and tenderness of this man's love that would guard and cherish her "as long as we both shall live." She had heard the ceremony read in a number of places: small churches, once or twice in great cathedrals where there had been much pomp and ceremony, but never had the words crept into her heart as they did now.

When at last the captain said quietly, "I now pronounce you man and wife," Claire had to set her teeth and blink very hard to control the tears as MacEwen took Nora into his arms with an ineffable tenderness and kissed her with a kiss that was a pledge and a promise.

Captain Rodolfson kissed the bride on the cheek. Nora laughed and offered her cheek to Curt, who smiled at her and followed the captain's lead. Then the wizened little monkey

of a cabin boy came in carrying a silver tray on which there were thin champagne glasses and a cooler holding a napkin-wrapped champagne bottle.

Nora gasped as the captain poured the champagne.

"Oh, a wedding aboard wouldn't be legal without champagne," Captain Rodolfson answered her small, startled gasp with a laugh. "I keep this on hand especially for such an occasion."

"Which happens," Curt contributed with a slight smile, "much more often than you might expect. This is about the fifth time, isn't it, Captain?"

"Oh, the fifth since you've been aboard, my boy," Captain Rodolfson said genially. "But I've lost count of how many times since I came aboard."

There was a moment of gaiety while toasts were drunk, and then MacEwen held out his hand to the captain and said with a deep earnestness, "I don't know how to thank you, Captain, or to tell you what this means to me."

"To *us*," Nora cut in, and MacEwen put his arm about her and drew her close.

"To us," he repeated, and once more his tone made it a pledge.

Nora said uneasily, "I just hope that tomorrow and what happens won't make you sorry—"

"Nothing's going to happen tomorrow, except that you and I are going to have a wonderful honeymoon aboard the Highland Queen, and then when it's over, we'll set up housekeeping. Anywhere you like—a castle in Spain or a two-room flat in Brooklyn. You'll be the boss."

Claire slipped from the cabin unnoticed and walked along the deck. She was glad for Nora that the girl need not stand alone before whatever questioning into the tangled affairs of her mother might await. MacEwen would stand sturdily beside her and ease whatever burdens might come.

She stood for a little while at the prow, looking down at the wide, white wake the sturdy old ship was cutting through the dark tropic waters, then turned sharply, startled at the

sound of a footstep behind her. The moonlight revealed Curt to her, and his face was no longer stern and angry.

"It was a very nice wedding, wasn't it?" he offered awkwardly, as she turned her back on him and went back to contemplating the white wake.

"Aren't all weddings?" she mocked over her shoulder, her tone brittle.

"Well, I suppose I wouldn't know about that," he admitted. "I'm glad it happened, though I was a little against it at first."

"Were you? Because you think she may be arrested tomorrow—"

"Of course not," Curt said swiftly. "It was just that they had only known each other since they came aboard and I wondered if it would last."

Claire turned and surveyed him coolly. His brown, handsome face was revealed clearly by the moonlight, but her own was in shadow.

"You're a bit of a cynic about marriage, aren't you?" she mocked him.

"Not a bit of it. It's a wonderful institution and I'm all for it, for men who live ashore and can establish a home," he protested. "I've been doing some thinking, Claire. If you'd rather live ashore—"

"Why, what are you talking about?" Her tone now was openly derisive, though her heart had given a great jump and was pounding so hard she felt sure he must hear it.

"I'm talking about us, Claire—you and me," said Curt, and his voice was husky with yearning. "I've been an awful fool, Claire, but I was trying to do what I thought was best for you. Living aboard a ship is no life for a girl like you."

"Oh, is that so?" she snapped shakily. "Well, since it's my life, don't you think I should have something to say about where I live it?"

There was a taut silence, and she could see his startled, afraid-to-hope expression.

"Does that mean, Claire, that you've reconsidered?" he asked.

"Reconsidered? I seem to remember you were the one who was so convinced that we'd been mistaken about each other."

She caught her breath to steady her voice, and before she could go on, he had taken a step closer and, while he was not touching her, she was within a hand's breadth of him.

"I know I was wrong, Claire, about myself," he explained with a deep earnestness as though it were desperately important for him to make her see what was in his heart. "When you made it so painfully plain what you thought of me, how cheaply you held me, I decided that maybe it might be as well if I let it go at that, since there is so little I can offer you."

"You offered me everything I wanted, Curt—your love—and then you took it back." There were tears in her voice.

"I didn't take it back, darling. I couldn't, not ever. It's yours, whether you want it or not, until the end of time."

"Then I want it, Curt—I want it so very much—" She moved slightly and was in his arms, and for a long and blissful moment there was neither time nor thought for words until she looked up at him and asked curiously, "But just a little while ago, Curt, you drove me away from you without caring in the least how much you hurt me. Why have you changed?"

"I was trying very hard to be strong, I suppose, for your sake," Curt confessed humbly. "And then I saw those two kids, facing nobody can be quite sure what, knowing that tomorrow may bring terrible things, and yet determined to go ahead and be together, to face whatever may come, and I realized how much I loved you and that with you in my arms, I wouldn't give a damn what tomorrow might bring!"

"Well, it's about time you were realizing that," Claire scolded him unsteadily. "I've known it for a long time."

"Have you, now?" The mockery was tender, inescapable. "What about last night and this morning?"

Her hand went up swiftly and covered his lips, silencing him.

"They never happened," she told him firmly. "We're be-

ginning right now, from this very moment. We're reaching for tomorrow—lots and lots of tomorrows—all of them filled with happiness because we'll reach for them together!"

She lifted her face for his eager, ardent kiss, and, held close in his arms, very softly whispered, "Together! Isn't that a lovely word? Together for all the tomorrows. Oh, Curt, I love you so!"

He made no answer in words, but the pressure of his mouth on hers, his arms holding her close and hard against him so she could feel the eager tumult of his heart against her own, were all the answer she would ever want.

When Claire Frazier turned in her candy-striped probationer's uniform for a pin reading Registered Nurse, she knew she owed a debt to those who had made her happiness possible. At once she set out to pay off her obligation with interest—and with love.

To her patients, Claire gave time and understanding and the skill of her hands. To her fiance, Dr. Richard Massey, she gave the devotion and tenderness of her heart.

And both mocked her, abusing her good intentions. Disillusioned and burning with shame, Claire had to pick up and mend the pieces of her broken heart.

The scene of Claire's reunion with life and love is a world cruise. Among the fellow passengers who changed her life are the attractive second officer, a detective, a confidence artist, and a romantic teenager. And the ports of call on her emotion-filled voyage include a visit with a would-be suicide, a ship-wide search for a strangely missing passenger, and an expensive game of cards which *might* have been dishonest.

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